Summer Preaching Series: “Refreshing My Spirit” – Part 2: “Rest”  
Psalm 37:1-7a; Matthew 11:28-30  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - June 28, 2015  
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Jesus said: “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”  
(Matthew 11:28).

For the past 15 years I have been rather nervous about preaching on the subject of “rest.”  
Let me explain why. On November 19, 2000 while I was at First Church in Charlotte, I  
preached a sermon on “rest” called Massive Risks and Mini Rests. It started snowing while we  
were worshipping that Sunday. I had built a little drama into my sermon presentation, but I got  
more drama than I bargained for! I had placed a recliner chair next to the pulpit. At an  
appropriate time and to illustrate our need for rest, I took off my robe and sat in the chair to  
illustrate my own need, and the need we all have, for rest. I promised the congregation and  
myself that I would take a nap that afternoon. I did, and ironically, woke up from a four-hour  
rest in the most excruciating pain. Ensuing actions were: a trip to the emergency room in the  
snow, a diagnosis of a herniated disc, two trips to a neurosurgeon, and then, finally, surgery on  
December 11. I think you may understand now my nervousness about preaching on this subject  
of rest. Anyway ….here goes!

Rest is an important part of our earthly life. If our spirits are to be refreshed this summer,  
than I would argue that rest is essential. Along with recreation or play that I spoke about last  
Sunday, and reflection, renewal and rejuvenation that are upcoming topics in this series, rest is  
needed if we expect to be spiritually refreshed.

Though we may be inclined to deny it, my observation is that we Americans are a very  
tired people, desperately in need of rest, and in danger of burning out. And this tiredness and  
burnout are not only symptoms of too much work in the marketplace, but also in the context of  
the church. By going, and going, and going, it is possible to burn out spiritually …to  
experience what Christian author, Gordon McDonald, calls “the drained condition” of  
Christians. The need for rest is as relevant for the refreshing of our spirits as it is for our  
physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing.  

Listen again to the words of Jesus: Come to me all
who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

A lady who knew me well in a previous appointment …who knew my need at that time to be better self-disciplined about time-out …about resting …gave me a little book before I moved to my next appointment. The book is called Gentle, Gentle Thursday and I will read it to you. It is very brief …so don’t get anxious! [Read text of book.] I am still trying my best to observe and practice the lesson of this book and have made my “gentle, gentle Thursday” the Friday of each week. So each Friday – when I give myself permission – I observe a much-needed “gentle, gentle Thursday.”

Everyone needs a “Sabbath” day, a day of rest. In our Christian tradition we have chosen to make our Sabbath not the seventh day of the week – the choice of some other faith groups – but the first day of the week – today, Sunday – in recognition and celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, having made that choice, the question is: What do we do with this day – a day that God has given as a special gift? In addition to coming to worship – and that is a wonderful way to observe Sunday – perhaps you can find other ways to make today your day of rest. After this morning service, why not find a chunk of time later this afternoon or evening to extend the quiet, worshipful spirit of this time by spending an hour or two in the quietness of a park, or just being together with your loved ones at home, or reading a book, or tending your plants, or taking a quiet drive along a country road? Remember a good rest on Sunday – the Christian “Sabbath” - will work wonders for Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday!

To help us to focus on this need for rest and refreshing our spirits, I have a guided meditation to share with you before we leave. Please close your eyes, or fix your eyes on some thing in the this worship space that will help you to meditate and concentrate on my words …

Jesus said, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Perhaps you feel tired this morning. Perhaps you are feeling a little anxious about something. Perhaps you are really burdened by some problem or challenge in your personal life, in your family, in the workplace.

There is much to do on this journey … this journey that we call our earthly life. There is so much to accomplish, so much to achieve. So much to carry. There are external demands upon us and we also create internal pressures by striving for high standards and self-expectations, unrealistic goals, perhaps even, perfection!
Now I want you to use your imagination as I offer a word picture ...Imagine that you are on your way to the office or to school one morning and that you decide to take a different route. You drive towards the edge of town, and beyond, across a bridge. And a little farther. You notice in the distance a narrow dirt road. As you approach that road you find yourself making the turn, and exiting. You follow the road, through the brush, which becomes thicker and lush. After a few miles you discover that you have made it through the thickly covered forest, and you arrive at a clearing in the woods.

You stop, step out of your car, and immediately you are greeted by an old friend, a friend you have not seen recently, a friend you have not seen, in fact, in a great while. You make small talk to try to bridge the long absence in the relationship. You offer excuses: there is so much activity in your life, your schedule is already filled, and so on.

You begin to talk, and your friend listens. The pressure, the needs, the expectations, the bottom line ...you begin to describe the world in which you live. As you tell the story your body feels the stress ...your arms, your shoulders, your head, your chest, your stomach.

Finally, you fall silent. Your friend begins to speak. “I'm glad that you've come this way today. It has not been accidental. I can appreciate the world in which you live. I do not deny the realities you describe. Allow me simply to invite you to see that world of pressures, of needs and expectations in a new way. I want to give you a new vision.”

“Let me ask you a question,” the friend continues. “Where do these needs, these expectations, these pressures come from? I did not place them on you. When I said, 'Follow me,' I invited you on this journey for a much different purpose. I invited you into my mission. The mission belongs to me – you are not responsible for it – I will take responsibility for the mission. If you have felt responsibility for all of this as a burden, then I would like you to release it ...let it go.”

“The people you serve in the workplace or ministry place do not belong to you, they are my people. Sure, they have their own needs, expectations, and pressures. You cannot meet all their expectations, remove all their pressures, or satisfy all their needs. Neither can you cure, fix, or save them. Their re-creation is my task, not yours. If feeling responsible for them has made you feel heavy laden, come over here to me, put down your heavy load ...release it ...let it go.”
“And while we are talking together, allow me to gently remind you of something else: You belong to me. Don’t you ever forget that. You are my beloved child. I have called you, claimed you, engraved you on the palm of my hand. So relax ...rest in this place called earth, on this journey called life ...enjoy the beauty that surrounds you, appreciate the friendships that are yours, draw strength from the love that is nearer than you know.”

“Listen! You belong to me. And if you truly know that, deep within, you will be my partner in mission and ministry wherever you are, and whatever you do. I have one further word for you, one that you know well, but it is worth repeating: ‘Do not worry about anything. Do not worry about tomorrow because today has enough worries of its own, and when you have concerns ...use prayer to make them known to me. My peace I give you, not the kind of peace that the world gives ...my peace passes all understanding ...it will guard your heart and mind ...and it will allow you to rest.”

After he is finished speaking, you embrace your old friend and express gratitude for his words and mostly for his presence. You return to your car, settle into it, and make your way, once again, to live and work and pray, reminded that you are a partner in God’s mission, among God’s people, in God’s world.

You may open your eyes now. I hope that was a refreshing experience for your soul. I hope it felt restful. Did it? I am grateful to a colleague, now Bishop Ken Carter, for this meditation although I confess that I did make a few changes to it.

One last word: We do not rest because our work is done – that is God’s privilege, not ours. Indeed, we might wonder whether our work will ever get done! No, we do not rest because our work is one; rather, we rest because God commanded it ...because God rested ...and because God created us with a need for rest to refresh our spirits. If rest as a godly principle was taken more seriously today in the church, we would have fewer Christian casualties along the way ...fewer burned-out, burned-up disciples of Jesus Christ dropping out of the journey.

Please hear this if you are too busy and too frazzled right now: Find your way to that road that will take you to that quiet place ...that clearing in the woods ...where you can stop, quit ...and be reconnected to the One who says, “Come to me” ...and you will know the refreshing of your spirit today. O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee. AMEN.