

Five Invitations from Jesus: Rest Sunday, 5/12/19

1 This month we're learning about the rarest of invitations- invitations that are actually inviting! Not self-serving, not after your credit card number or your vote, not appeals to a fad, and not the product of a mailing list. Jesus was a master of giving invitations that were personal and life-changing. The invitations he gave to the disciples and the crowds two thousand years ago are still invitations each of us can receive today. And even more, we can learn from Jesus how to become better at inviting others. Today we consider the invitation from Jesus to rest.

2 Have you ever built something that seemed to take forever? When we moved from Kentucky to Minnesota to serve my first church in Coon Rapids, we bought a house with an unfinished basement. Like all good realtors, ours easily imagined how we could finish the basement and create a much needed fourth bedroom. We had enough money saved that we could afford to do it ourselves. The problem wasn't money, it was the time! Jana was busy getting the kids settled into school and new friends, and I was starting my first year as a pastor. So naturally, I filled every free hour away from the church hauling lumber and sheet rock, installing new duct work, running wires, taping, mudding, etc. It was exhausting, and it was really stupid. We finally got the basement finished after a year of this, but at what cost? Moving is stressful. Starting a new career is stressful. Raising a family is stressful. How is it that I imagined that the best way to cope with that stress was to pile on more stress with nonstop work at a time when what I really needed was some extra sabbath time with God?

We live in a culture that idolizes productivity and work. At our jobs, no matter what we do, our managers are asking us to do more with less. When meeting people for the first time, we usually ask them what they "do" rather than who they are. Even our vacations are often frenetic concatenations of activities rather than restful times of renewal. How did we get into such a sad state of unrest?

3 It turns out that runaway expectations for productivity aren't really so new at all. In Walter Brueggemann's book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW*, he compares the life of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to our life in America today. We know from what we read in the Biblical book of Exodus that the life of a slave was hard, and that when God sent Moses to deliver them from that life, Pharaoh resisted. How did he

resist? By calling them lazy and doubling down on their workload, expecting them to produce the same quota of mud bricks with straw, but now requiring them to gather their own straw. They were beaten and pushed, driven on to produce the bricks needed for Pharaoh's grand construction projects.

Incidentally, the same method of making bricks with mud and straw is still popular in many parts of the world. I'm guessing none of us fill our days making bricks with mud and straw, but we do fill our days. Sports practices and tournaments, caring for our spouses, parents, children and grandchildren, school and homework, one or more jobs, serving at church and in community groups- the list goes on. Sometimes the pressure to produce more bricks comes from our employers, sometimes it comes from our own need to keep busy and feel connected, and sometimes it comes because we're spending more than we can afford- for our housing, our health care, our cars, and so many other things. Does that really have to be the story of our lives that will be told at our funerals? That we poured our lives into making more bricks, never slacking off?

4 By the time Jesus showed up on the scene and gave his famous speech to the Pharisees about picking grain on the sabbath, the Israelites seemed to have lost their empathy for their ancestors in slavery and the revolutionary nature of a sabbath rest. Can you imagine how the idea of resting one day out of seven would have sounded to one of Pharaoh's slaves, recently granted freedom? The sabbath was supposed to be good news: Just as God rested on the seventh day, we were meant to rest as a regular rhythm of our relationship with God and the other people we share this planet with. At the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the primary demand given to Pharaoh was that the people be allowed to set aside their work and go to the mountain to worship God.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, had turned the sabbath into bad news, a series of thirty-nine strict prohibitions that included reaping grain from a field.¹ Some of the most curious prohibitions included kindling or extinguishing a fire and writing or erasing two or more letters! No wonder Jesus was a little peeved with the Pharisees! The sabbath was never meant to be about the rules and what we can't do. Instead, it was meant to be an invitation to

¹ https://thenazareneway.com/sabbath/39_prohib_sabbath.htm

find our rest in worship, drawing close to the God who knows us and loves us, and to share our rest with our neighbors. It was a radical idea that flew in the face of Pharaoh's demand to keep making bricks. It's still a radical idea for us, thousands of years later, as we continue to live our lives focused on making more bricks.

5 I like The Message translation of the invitation of Jesus from Matthew 11 that we heard earlier, but I want to bring you back to a translation closer to the words Jesus actually said, this time from the NRSV: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”²

This was a pretty provocative thing to say. At first blush it makes no sense. A yoke is something that's put on a beast of burden or a person to translate their bodily motion into productive work. Why would anyone in their right mind want to put on a yoke, for Jesus or anyone else? Does this mean that Jesus is no better a master for us than Pharaoh, really just interested in squeezing more work out of his disciples? Of course not.

At the time Jesus said this, Jews commonly talked about obedience to the law of Moses as wearing a yoke, the yoke of God's law. The reason Jesus can say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light is that he came to be our way to freedom and salvation. That's also why he was constantly arguing with the Pharisees. They wanted to double down on the rules, in effect adding weight to the load carried by everyone trying to be right with God by keeping the rules, wearing the yoke of the law. Jesus said, “You don't get it. Unhitch the wagon, you don't have to pull that anymore. The real way to be right with God is to walk with me, learn from me, do the things I'm doing. Following the rules can't save you.”

Do you see why this is so important? When Jesus invites us to rest, he's not just suggesting we sleep an extra hour or cut back on our overtime. There's a deeper kind of rest that speaks to the needs of our souls, the rest that comes from laying down the burden of constantly trying to get enough or be good enough- enough for God, enough for our families, enough for our peers, enough for the high expectations we have of ourselves. You are

² Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)

accepted- Not because of the number of bricks you can make without straw; not because of the way you pull the heavy load of strictly avoiding doing all the things on God’s naughty list. You are accepted because you choose to stop serving the harsh task masters of the world, and choose to serve Jesus instead, the one who can not only show you the way to peace with God, but who is himself the way.

6 Jesus didn’t come to lead an armed insurrection against Israel’s Roman occupiers. But Jesus did come to lead a revolution, not with chariots and swords but with counter-cultural words and actions that reach back into our history and remind us that just like the Hebrew slaves, we too were delivered from slavery and blessed with the sabbath rest. Jesus invites us to not only “remember the sabbath, and keep it holy,”³ but to recapture the gift of what sabbath was meant to be.

Anyone who’s in school, has a job, is raising a family, or is collecting a social security check knows that every year we’re being asked to do more with less, to make bricks without straw. Economists cheer when measures of economic productivity such as the Gross Domestic Product rise. But underneath those numbers are real people like you and me, trying our best to figure out a way to live well, all the while feeling like we’re running on fumes.

You were made for so much more than endless labor on a treadmill of days. Jesus is standing at the door of your heart this morning with an invitation. “Come to me...and I will give you rest.” I wonder how God might be inviting you to draw close this week, to lay down your burdens and rest.



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³ Exodus 20:8