

“Rest and Growth”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord Michigan

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Texts: Psalm 116 and Luke 13: 6-9

“Between studying theology in a competitive seminary program at Emory University, working on campus, doing an internship, and raising a young son, she couldn’t catch a moment’s rest. (*The Nap Bishop is Spreading the Good Word: Rest*, *New York Times*, 10/13/2022)” Sound familiar? It doesn’t matter if you are working or if you are retired, have a family or do not, are in a relationship or are not, people are tired. And yet, on we go, working, playing, texting, posting, running here and there – you name it! We are a nation that is chronically tired, and we live in a society that need to push back on what the New York Times calls, “America’s obsession with productivity at all costs.” We need balance between producing and rest, growth, and rest, doing and not doing. Both rest and growth are necessary for individuals, communities, nations, and societies. How’s our balance? How’s your balance?

The opening quote is from an article in the New York Times by Melonyce McAfee that describes the life of Tricia Hersey. Hersey is a self-described “Nap Bishop.” It’s quite a read if you have the time, but for Hersey the load became so large that she finally said to herself that she was, “Exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually, and [she] just didn’t see any other way except to take the radical leap and say: ‘I don’t care, let the chips fall where they may. If I fail out of school, that’s fine if I don’t finish that grade – because I’m going to bed.’” She learned to take a nap, a long bath, meditate, or deliberately daydream. The short respites

allowed her mind to clear, and it proved pivotal. She got better grades, even though she was studying less. In her case, as a Black woman, she saw a legacy of forced labor and exhaustion that her ancestors endured rising again in her own life. She was pushing herself to the brink.

Maybe your history is different, but I think there is a lot about history that informs what we do now, and from time to time we need to reflect on what is important to us, how much we just go, go, go, without much reflection. A good friend of mine, Rosangela Berbert, Executive Director of Samaritan, a counseling center in the Appleton area of Wisconsin writes, “What we give attention to grows deeper roots.” Yes, it’s a plant metaphor and that leads us into the story from today’s Gospel lesson.

If you’ll recall, Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree planted in a vineyard. Why would anyone want to plant a fig tree in the middle of a vineyard? Good question, but not the point. Anyway, the fig tree is in the vineyard and it’s not producing any figs. The vineyard owner gets angry and decides that if it hasn’t produced in three years, cut it down. The gardener, on the other hand, asks for one more season. But it’s not just a season of waiting to see what the fig tree does. No, the gardener offers to fertilize it, tend it, nurture it, and if after a year it doesn’t produce, well, then it can be cut down. The owner agrees and the parable ends.

There are many ways to interpret this story, but for today, I want to follow the thinking of Rev. Jeff Chu who writes, “Perhaps this parable is better read as a gentle rebuke against those of us who are all too comfortable with our on-demand, instant-gratification

culture – and who believe the lie that we can control more than we actually do. Too, this parable was a word that Jesus needed to preach to his very human self. After all, he's the one who, in Matthew and Mark, curses a fig tree for failing to give him fruit when he wants it. Perhaps this is our invitation: Slow down. Do your part. Remember the promise."

I know some of you are saying this sermon is for Pastor Greg. People tell me all the time that I'm doing too much, taking on too much, worrying too much, and so on. That may be correct, but at the same time, I often hear retired people saying they are busier retired than they were when they were working. No one in this room, I'm sure! I'm not saying that we all need to quit and just hope good things happen. Quite the contrary. However, I do think we need to consider balance, the need for respite, a break, and yes, sleep.

The woman I referred to earlier, "The Nap Bishop," Tricia Hersey, has turned her personal transformation into a movement. She's around 50 years old and at 48 she began inviting people to nap collectively while she offered soothing sermons about the sheer power of sleep and dreaming. Part of me says that this is nothing new, people have been sleeping through sermons for years! But her point is much deeper than just sleeping away. She shares the notion that "rest is resistance...It is about collectively refusing to run ourselves into the ground."

Here are some of the messages she gives to her nearly half a million followers on Instagram and other platforms: "If you're not resting, you will not make it. I need you to make it. You will have to rest to believe in this message. You won't be able to retweet, and meme design your way to freedom from grind culture." She calls the Nap Bishop's one

“tender rage” and says that is by design: She wants to jar people enough to wake up...and sleep.” She even authored a book I have not read, entitled, “Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto”.

Further, she says that this is about literal naps, “but it’s also about imagination work, justice work. It’s about education: We need to understand what the systems are doing to us, so that we can resist in a way that is fruitful for us.” Finally, Hersey relates, “I judge success by how many naps I took in a week, and how many times I told somebody no; how many boundaries I upheld. To me, that’s justice, that’s liberation, that’s freedom.”

You may or may not agree with her, and you can see logically that there are limits here, but for most of us, we aren’t sleeping too much. We are getting plenty done. We are working hard. And if we’re not careful, it can affect our health negatively. Any doctor can explain the dangers of too little sleep on your health.

There are lots of reasons I wanted to share this with you, but most importantly, the rest time leads to imagination. We have a critical shortage of imagination in our culture. We act, and act, and act, and react, react, react. Constantly driving. Constantly berating ourselves for not doing enough. Worrying.

Consider the rest of what my friend, Rosangela, offered to those who read her work. Remember that what we give our attention to grows deeper roots. She asks, “What are you tending? What needs more care? What is already going strong that needs tending?” Our answers have a lot to do with what will grow. Maybe we need to apply a little more fertilizer (this works especially well in politics! 😊), or maybe some down time, or maybe it is time to

act, or... No matter what, it is important we consider the balance of rest versus growth, rest versus action, rest versus doing. In order to grow we need rest and tending to.

Someday it will soon be time to plant or tend your garden and yard. Will you get as much attention as your gardens?

I want to end with a powerful poem I read called, *“For When Resting Feels Like Too Great a Risk,”* by Cole Arthur Riley, a prayer adapted from her book *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* that was posted on Instagram:

Rested God,

We want more than a life lived exhausted.

That you have woven healing rhythms of rest into our minds and bodies

reminds us we are worthy of habitual restoration.

Remind us that when we pause or rest,

we are restoring not only our own bodies,

but the very condition of a world held captive by greed and utility.

We grow weary of societies who view us as more machine than human,

more product than soul.

The fear that we won't survive without overworking stalks our days.

Liberate us from the depraved socioeconomic structures that require

that the poor and vulnerable sacrifice their own rest

at the altar of survival and opportunity.

Remind us that the beauty and paradox of our humanness

is that we were made to close our eyes,

that we might see.

May it be so.

Amen and Amen.