

## **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – (proper 9) July 9**

We often are totally unaware of the metaphors we use to communicate the Gospel. Some of these have become “dead metaphors” for us. For instance “forgiveness” is not originally a church lingo word at all, but something lenders rarely do to a loan. Likewise “Redeem” is taken from the slave markets in which a person who had declared bankruptcy might have been purchased by a friend or loved one when they were sold into slavery. One could “buy them back” and set them free. When these become primarily words which we only hear in the theological context, they lose their power to affect us. You can imagine that a slave heard the Bible call Jesus “redeemer” as a very potent word.

There are many other metaphors of the Gospel which float around out there. I am proposing that for the month of July we look at just one of them: “Rest.” Hebrews says that there is a Sabbath Rest remaining for the people of God. It is a picture of heaven itself. John paints a picture of uncounted numbers of people enjoying their rest in chapter 7 of Revelation as they stand around the throne with a palm branch in hand and Jesus wipes away every tear.

In a world in which we are often over stimulated, over-loaded, and over-scheduled, the idea of rest and vacation is a natural in the summer months. But even then, don't we often over-schedule our vacations? Have you ever returned from a vacation so tired you needed a vacation from the vacation? Sin has such a grip on us that our vacations, which ought to be a taste of heaven, have become instead another form of the burden which has exhausted us since Adam and Eve were driven from Eden.

I believe that if Jesus were preaching today he would spend a great deal more time on rest. But Jesus is preaching today, he is just using your voice and the voices of millions of other preachers. His people, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, are not so much hungry as they are exhausted. It is time to explore the whole idea of the Gospel message as a message of rest.

There are many forms of rest. I think many of us in our exhaustion get fixated on the whole lack of sleep thing and that is indeed a form of rest. The Christian can indeed sleep because the whole world is in Jesus' very capable hands. I don't have to carry all the burden myself. But there is much more to rest than that. A wise man once said that the definition of heaven is that time and place when the difference between what I want to do and what I have to do goes away. In heaven I will always be doing what I want to do and I will always be doing what I have to do because they will always be the same thing. Heaven is perpetual leisure, not because we won't be busy, but because we will always be busy with the things we love to do.

For the Christian, the most obvious sort of rest is the rest which comes to us when Jesus bears the burden of our sin and removes from us the onerous load of the Law with its requirements. Heaven is not a payment for a good life lived. It simply cannot be bought but must be given and God has done that in Christ. That is a restful statement. I don't have to strive for heaven's peace. It is already mine.

Flowing out of that primary rest comes other sorts of rests. The LORD says that vengeance is his and not mine. Evening the score, making the scales balance is an exhausting sort of life to live. Jesus tells us in the parable of the weeds among the wheat (two weeks after this Sunday's readings) that we simply don't need to worry about it. Making the church work, carrying the burden of an institution which may be falling apart or at least not growing is another heaven load. There are those out there that will tell you that if you are not growing it must be because you are not doing something right. While a good dose of confession and self-searching is not a bad thing, it can be idolatrous to do so and assume that the kingdom of God is controllable by us. There is much mystery in the growth of God's kingdom. It is not our fault if it does not grow. Indeed Paul got kicked out of many towns, Jesus was rejected by men. There are no guarantees in this business, only a risky Spirit and a powerful Word which cannot be controlled. Jesus will free us from the burden of that responsibility next week. The last week of July will again see him hitting the rest that comes from the grace of God as he proclaims the parables of hidden treasure, pearl and net. If you are going to use this theme, have a care to let something remain for next week!

If you are a musician you know that music needs the rests as much as it needs the notes and rhythm and key signature.

### **Collect of the Day**

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, Your mercy attends us all our days. Be our strength and support amid the wearisome changes of this world, and at life's end grant us Your promised rest and full joys of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*What is rest? Is it just the absence of work? Or is it really enjoying what we are doing, no longer considering the task as work. Rest can be either a verb or a noun. How do we "rest" as a verb? What is involved with such resting. Is it simply not working or is it something more? Do we have to work pretty hard at resting? Many people vacation that way.*

*A fascinating study is to look at the seventh day of creation when God rested from his creative work. What does that mean? Aquinas spent quite a bit of time there as did Augustine. God clearly did not rest from all that he does, or creation would cease to be. God needed no rest, so why did he do it? Did he simply want to enjoy what he had made? Did he step aside and rest so creation could do its thing? Augustine said that the days of creation were logical markers, the first real period of time was the 7<sup>th</sup> day, and we are all still living in the seventh day of creation.*

*Our God and Father – he is both the omnipotent and the loving presence in our lives. His mercy attends all our days. We can easily see the need for the mercy on the worst of our days, but he also shows up on our best days with his mercy. It would be a mistake to think that any of those days don't need a full dose of that mercy. Even when I am in church, singing with all my might,*

*praying with the people of God, even in those moments I need God's mercy. My best moments and best actions do not meet Heaven's standard on their own, but are made heavenly through God's mercy.*

*We beseech God to be our strength and support amid the wearisome changes of this world. I think this language resonates with the folks in our time. Change just takes work – it is wearisome. The changes that are so prevalent can be very wearisome after a while. So we might want to ask, which changes are wearisome? Is it the change of aging? Is it the change of nations and politics that seem bent on wearing us down? Is it the change of our culture which has no room for God it seems and would squeeze him out of our lives? Or is there another change that wearies us. These all could be identified and many more. What do you think?*

*We also liked how God was the strength when we were weary. Weary people are at the end of their strength and stamina, but that is exactly why we need and have God for us. His resources are inexhaustible.*

*We pray that at life's end God would grant us each his promised rest and the full joy of his salvation. But if we look forward to a fullness, is it not also true that we have in part now? There is a now and not yet element to this. What is the restfulness and joy to which we can point as a foretaste of that promised rest and full joy? Is it worship? Is it those moments of blissful happiness we get once a great while.*

*What is the difference between rest and joy? Are they really synonymous or are they actually different things?*

## **Readings**

Zechariah 9:9-12

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;  
righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

<sup>10</sup> I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall speak peace to the nations;  
his rule shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

<sup>11</sup> As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,  
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

<sup>12</sup> Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;  
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

<sup>13</sup> *For I have bent Judah as my bow;  
I have made Ephraim its arrow.  
I will stir up your sons, O Zion,  
against your sons, O Greece,  
and wield you like a warrior's sword.*

<sup>14</sup> *Then the LORD will appear over them,  
and his arrow will go forth like lightning;  
the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet  
and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.*

<sup>15</sup> *The LORD of hosts will protect them,  
and they shall devour, and tread down the sling stones,  
and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine,  
and be full like a bowl,  
drenched like the corners of the altar.*

<sup>16</sup> *On that day the LORD their God will save them,  
as the flock of his people;  
for like the jewels of a crown  
they shall shine on his land.*

<sup>17</sup> *For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!  
Grain shall make the young men flourish,  
and new wine the young women.*

*I have stretched this passage for us to consider today. Notice two things in this extension. First of all, notice that Zechariah sees this in eschatological terms. The Lord appears, his arrows like lightning, the trump will sound. Many of these terms will be picked up in Jesus' own eschatological discourses and John's Apocalypse. The second element I want you to pay attention to is the metaphor at the end of the text. It is about food. Remember these people lived in protein deprived situations. They did not get enough to eat. We know this from examining the skeletal remains of people from the period. Zechariah speaks of abundance. Rest is the proper metaphor for our sleep-deprived world.*

*Turning our attention to the passage from Zechariah which we will preach, we find a passage which is familiar to many of us and might seem more appropriate on a Palm Sunday when it is also read. But the second part of the passage really fits today as well. He will establish peace and a rest from the warfare that has plagued the people of God. He shall speak peace to the nations and his benevolent rule shall stretch from sea to sea.*

*Whenever I hear these prophecies about the kingdom of God ruling from sea to sea I think of the church. Too often we focus on the messiness and the failings of the institution. But the truth be told, within the people of God Jesus does indeed rule throughout this world. His message of peace, the absolution which is spoken and which has the very promise and authority of God*

*behind it happens when God's people gather. There is a rest to be found among the people of God. There is a burden to be set down and not picked up again. It is the burden of our sin.*

*Because of the blood of his covenant with us. Can you read that and not think of the Lord's Supper and Jesus words of Institution? "This cup is my blood of the new covenant..." We are set free from the waterless, dry, lifeless pit. We return to the stronghold, to our God, for we are prisoners of hope. What a marvelous phrase. God promises to restore to us double. Double what? Double what was lost? Two Edens? Just what is the promise here?*

*Three years ago we were attracted to the concept of the Prisoners of Hope – it could be that we as prisoners hope or it could also mean that we are in a prison of hope as Paul is the slave of righteousness. The person who has been beaten down and left without any other recourse still has hope. He can hope in God, he has no other option, he is a captive of hope. We thought that might be a really interesting theme to develop and indeed it is.*

*A prisoner has no choice, but is stuck there. How are we imprisoned in hope? Is this because we are so enraptured by the presence of Christ that we would never leave? Is the bond that holds us there nothing other than the love of God.*

*Hope is an important phrase to get straight – Modern American English has reduced this word to a weak wish, something we would like to happen but are not expecting to happen. Paul and the rest of the Biblical authors do not use it that way. For them, hope is much stronger, more akin to the way we use the word "expectation." If one has hope, one expects a promise to be fulfilled, it is a sure thing, you are willing to bank on it. A person in the Bible hopes and that means he or she acts on the promise. That person has "hope" in the Biblical sense.*

*So we are a prisoner of that hope? What does that mean? Our expectation of God keeps us here? Our expectations are like a prison? Or is there another way to take this phrase?*

*Is the message here simply the strength and reality of hope? Do we preach the power of the term today? Paul says that the greatest gifts of God are Faith, Love, and Hope. Do we not think much of Hope and does Zechariah invite us to focus on that word today – does he use this really strong language "prisoners of hope" to help us understand that this warm fuzzy thing we believe we understand and can safely discount is a potent gift from God?*

Psalm 145:1-14

I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.

<sup>2</sup> Every day I will bless you  
and praise your name forever and ever.

<sup>3</sup> Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,  
and his greatness is unsearchable.

- <sup>4</sup> One generation shall commend your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.  
<sup>5</sup> On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.  
<sup>6</sup> They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,  
and I will declare your greatness.  
<sup>7</sup> They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD is good to all,  
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

<sup>10</sup> All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,  
and all your saints shall bless you!

<sup>11</sup> They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom  
and tell of your power,

<sup>12</sup> to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

[The LORD is faithful in all his words  
and kind in all his works.]

<sup>14</sup> The LORD upholds all who are falling  
and raises up all who are bowed down.

<sup>15</sup> *The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.*

<sup>16</sup> *You open your hand;  
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

<sup>17</sup> *The LORD is righteous in all his ways  
and kind in all his works.*

<sup>18</sup> *The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.*

<sup>19</sup> *He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;  
he also hears their cry and saves them.*

<sup>20</sup> *The LORD preserves all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

<sup>21</sup> *My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,  
and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.*

Romans 7:14-25a

<sup>13</sup> Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. <sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! *So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

*Paul is struggling – but he is struggling to master his own sin. The more he struggles, the more he realizes that he cannot do this. Our generation’s problem is that we are just not struggling all that hard. We rather like our sins, legalize them, and believe that this makes it OK. This last week we heard in Portland of a brother and sister who were finally convicted of running a massive prostitution business. Millions of dollars have been seized. The primary charge against them, however, is not that they have participated in the destruction of countless lives, particularly those of young women, but tax evasion. Whatever it takes, I guess, but when do we say that something is really wrong?*

*We are not fighting any heroic battles against sin, and hence we are lulled into thinking that sin is not a great enemy, but a little problem of the will-power. Sin is only found in public anymore on the dessert menus at our restaurants. And we all know that dieting is just a matter of willpower.*

*Perhaps we need to see Paul as a failed dieter. He knows that he needs to control his eating, but still he finds himself sitting at the counter with a half-dozen, half-eaten donuts before him. We cut the donuts after service in half so we can eat twice as many. We don’t want to make a joke of it. People really struggle with weight – Paul really struggled with sin. Is this a way to get our people to see the struggle, or at least get a small sense of it?*

*Here is another opportunity to preach rest. Paul is at war with his own body. The good he wants to do he does not do, the evil he does not want to do, that is the very thing that he does. The world tells us that if we just try hard enough we can conquer sin, we can use the five steps, the seven keys, the twelve secrets, etc. But as Paul found out, life is not a cookbook. One cannot follow the rules and the instructions have it come out just so. Paul does not understand his own*

*actions. They seem to be at odds with his will and they are. He wants to do good, but he does evil. He wants to refrain from evil and that is the very thing that he does.*

*What do you think Paul means here? Does he mean that sometimes he intends good but it turns out evil or does he really mean that he is out of control? Or does he mean that he is of two minds here, there is a war internal to himself?*

*This chapter raises some interesting and difficult questions of anthropology or just what is a human being. There is a really interesting kerfuffle brewing in the world of psychology over this. For the past several decades science has located most of what happens in our mental lives in the chemistry of our brains. But that is being challenged. Tomas Nagel, in a fascinating little book which ruffled a lot of feathers, suggested that the failure of science to explain human consciousness points to a spiritual reality. The reductive materialists in the scientific community howled about that, especially since Nagel is one of them, an agnostic scientific type of thinker, not a religious man. If you want to read the book it is entitled "Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Concept of Nature is Almost Certainly False" You have to give it to the guy, he doesn't leave you guessing about where he stands.*

*What does Paul say about a human being? What are we? Since the enlightenment there have been a lot of people who located our being in our will, our desires. You see this today in the sort of pop-psychology which understands a full human life to be the life which is acting on our desires and will. If you want to do something, you should just do it!*

*Much of current thought on the subject wants to speak of embodiment. The real message is not in intention or will but in action. Our actions govern our will, not the other way around. What we do will eventually determine what we want.*

*Paul saw a human will involved in this picture but it is not entirely clear what he means. Does he mean it like Freud? Freud, stealing an idea from Plato, saw a three part person – the famous id, ego, and super-ego which you may have learned about in an intro to psychology course a long time ago. In that construct there were multiple forces, the libidinous id and the ego were harnessed together and driven by the super-ego like a chariot with horses who wanted to go different directions. (That is actually the image which Plato used.)*

*How exactly you understand a human being is important and will shape the way you read this text. What is a person? Is he or she a chemical machine controlled by electric impulses from inside the cranium? Is she or he a collection of evolutionary instincts which have been shaped by billions of years of survival of the fittest? (Evolutionary determinism) Are we intellects who struggle to communicate? Are we creatures of will and desires and little more? Are we embodied spirits who are yearned to be freed back into spiritual realities (Buddhism among others.) All of these fail in the final analysis, but you can look over almost any congregation of people and see folks who hold all these ideas and more. Each of them will put their own lens on the words which Paul writes here.*

*What did Paul mean? Can we even really get there? I think we can get closer. One helpful key is the word “law” in this text and other places. Paul seems to see his world and the human being as subject to forces which he often labels with the term “law.” The primary force which operates in this world and the human being is “sin.” You should also know that there is a great debate about how Paul uses the term “Law.” He is not at all consistent.*

*The Christian life involves a struggle with this force which Paul names sin. In this life we still have that old man clinging tightly to us. Being declared to be liberated by the force of God’s love and grace does mean that the old forces have just run away and left us alone. The very real spiritual power of sin still seeks to exert control over us. For Paul, deliverance is not found in my struggling or in some victory that I will win. He does not locate this in the human will triumphing over our libidinous desires. Liberation from this body of death which is subject to the power of sin comes through the Lord Jesus Christ whom Paul praises and so do I.*

*Perhaps the best gospel in here is the simple truth that here we have an apostle of Jesus Christ, a man who wrote about a quarter of the New Testament, he is struggling with sin and cannot seem to get a mastery of it. Should I be surprised or discouraged when I cannot either? Paul was close to the Lord – that rather put a great target on his chest for Satan’s arrows. Our comfort with our own sins are not good news, indeed it might be simply that we are good at coping with sin and have become comfortable with it.*

*Should I listen to those who say that my Christianity is somehow less than adequate because I have not achieved some sort of perfection? If you serve in a community as I did whose Christian churches were dominated by the holiness bodies, you know what I am talking about. There is a significant strain of American Christianity which has decided that the real Christians are the ones who don’t sin. In so doing they have gone beyond Paul (always dangerous) and it seems to me enslaved themselves once more to an adherence to the law from which Paul wrote so much to liberate us.*

*I have to tell you that this passage has inspired a great deal of commentary and I would recommend that the preacher be careful to avail himself of this. I recommended Grieb’s commentary earlier, but also Luke T. Johnson, N. T. Wright, and others have written extensively on what is happening in these verses. Occasionally they are subject to over-analysis and unnecessary complexity, but sometimes it is really good.*

Matthew 11:25-30

<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; <sup>26</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. <sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and

lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

*Isn't it just restful to get this text after last week!*

*In the verses immediately before this Jesus has castigated the local villages which have not received his preaching. He thanks God that he has revealed it to the foolish children who are listening to him now, guys like Peter, James, and John. But that is what he does, he reveals the Father. It is a real revelation, a real giving. And that revealing bestows rest. Is it because ever since the days of creation, God has been resting? Is that one beautiful way to describe God, a being who is at perfect rest? Augustine and Aquinas said so. Is the revelation of the Father and the rest which Jesus offers really one and the same thing?*

*Wouldn't it be fun to be a child again, carefree and without a worry in the world. Perhaps your childhood was not like that. Many people do not experience that, but I had real moments of that. Jesus says that the children can see it but the learned cannot and he says this is an act of God for which he gives thanks. Without waxing too anti-intellectual or romanticizing things too much, I have often found that the simple people in a congregation have a much better grasp of God than the learned, perhaps even better than my colleagues at the university, yes, even some within the theology department. I will tell anyone and everyone that it was a fellow who never graduated from high school in my first parish who really taught me the most about prayer, not the Doctors of Theology at the seminary.*

*Jesus invites all those who labor and are heavily burdened to come to him. He gives rest. His yoke is easy, his burden is light. Jesus himself is gentle and lowly and he gives the rest we really need, the rest for our souls. I don't know if you have ever found this to be true, but my activities often keep me so busy I don't really have time to think about what I am doing. But when the time comes, when the busy-ness of life abates for a moment and I start to think, I am not necessary at peace then. In fact, sometimes I long for the mindless busy-ness of life. Jesus offers me the real peace, the peace of the soul which can make all my work seem light.*

*What is the labor and the heavy burden that our people bear?*

- 1. Is it the weariness of life which God described for Adam, the treadmill of life? We must work so hard to afford the things we want we are too tired to enjoy them. If we take the time to enjoy them we are too broke to afford them.*
- 2. Is it the weariness of age? Many of the people to whom we will preach have seen many years pass by. This life often is burdensome for them. I have ministered to more than one who simply sought some sort of release. They just wanted to go home to be with Jesus.*
- 3. Is the burden the burden of guilt or the cumulative burden of relationships ended, decisions made badly, opportunities lost, etc.? It is a great task and burden to put up the façade and continually pretend that all is OK when it is not.*

4. *Is it a burden of worry or cares for something, perhaps even this congregation whose numbers shrink, whose age increases, and whose ministry diminishes with every passing year? Several of the guys are in situations where congregations are calling a pastor. Such a parish may well feel the burden of extra responsibility or urgency.*
5. *Anxiety is a real burden which people can bear. Worry wears a person down. Is this what our people are thinking about when Jesus urges them to lay down the burden? Most of the time this worry is about things over which we have no control.*
6. *Personal burdens, often around our children. We gnaw on the past, wondering what we did wrong that our child has grown up and found themselves in such a place – bad marriage, out of church, out of work, drug/alcohol addiction, etc. This is a huge burden in people’s lives.*
7. *Is it simply physical exhaustion? My wife works nights at a local hospital. Sometimes when she comes to church after an all-night shift, it is all she can do to stay awake through the sermon. Of course this means she feels guilty when she has to say no to the after-service invite for lunch.*

*Is the burden Jesus removes here some other burden?*

*A quick look at the context of this little passage may be interesting for the answer to this question. In chapter 11 Jesus is questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist. He tells them that he is the One. He lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, etc. Then he pronounces a curse upon the impenitent cities of Galilee who had not listened to him. It will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment.*

*Then come these words, almost like they were dropped into the middle of this.*

*The passages immediately after describe his intensifying conflict with the Pharisees. First his disciples are chastised for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath and Jesus declares himself to be lord of the Sabbath. Then he heals a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath and incurs their wrath. Notice that Sabbath is about rest. This is surely not coincidental in Matthew who carefully constructs these passages and often weaves themes over long sections.*

*After this, Matthew inserts an editorial comment on the fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah. The prophecy is a servant song in which the servant is chosen and proclaims victory to the people and hope to the Gentiles but the servant himself is gentle and kind. The bruised reed he does not break and the smoldering wick he does not quench.*

*Then Jesus is accused of having an unclean spirit and he launches into a discussion of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Jesus then continues the fight against the Pharisees. The tree is known by its fruit and they will only get the sign of Jonah who was in the belly of the fish for three days.*

*He then speaks of how unclean spirits often re-inhabit a person who has been cleansed.*

*At the end of chapter 12 Jesus declares that anyone who hears and follows his word is dearer than his mother and brothers and sisters.*

*Matthew has collected what at first might seem like a random collection of sayings and deeds but there are some discernable threads that run through this. The conflict with the Pharisees seems to be paramount, especially as it focused on the keeping of the law. Jesus casts himself as a liberator from a human devised legalism which is crippling the people. This puts the whole burden and weariness into a context.*

*But also there is a strong forgiveness piece running through here as well as, in the questions of John's disciples, the notion of the new kingdom which is liberating people from the chains of deafness, blindness, poverty, etc.*

*All of these seem to have some role to play in the burden. This passage in our text for the day also seems to occupy the middle spot, a very important spot in the structures of Matthew.*

*Is the light and gentle burden which Jesus lays on our shoulders really the burden of forgiveness? Does he say, "here is the way to deal with your sins." Is the burden really the "burden" of letting go of my sins that he may carry them? Is this the whole point of the Torah? God said over and over again that the people of Israel should follow the laws, statutes and ordinances of the Torah. But if you look at them, most of those laws were all about how the community dealt with sin, "bring a lamb, sacrifice it, and God restores the relationship."*

*Is the light yoke simply the presence of Christ. He feeds and clothes, nurtures and loves me unconditionally. Is that the lightness of the yoke? He does not even ask us to "bring the sins" to him. He simply promises his gracious presence. Are we simply sitting at his feet soaking him up?*

*Is this passage really about the contrast of 'being' versus 'doing' Are we really the children of God, running around after Church without a care in the world and eating too many cookies. Does Jesus ask us to look at those little ones and say "that's me."*

*The image of the yoke also has some interesting leverage here. If Christ is bearing the burden but we are yoked to him, the real "pain" comes when we try to leave him. As long as we are walking with him, he carries the load and we are along for the ride. But when we would leave him, suddenly we are striving against the yoke which becomes heavy and cruel as we seek to sever that bond. Then we have the burden to bear. We are a prisoner of hope/Christ (see the last two lines of the OT lesson). It is a very good prison to be in, it is our stronghold.*

## **Law**

1. We are weary and have been since Adam got chucked out of Eden. It is simply the way of our life that we always are striving for more but it always seems to be just out of reach. I once finished remodeling a room in basement only to pick up a box filled with things I wanted to return to the room and discover the bottom of the box is wet. Apparently the

remodeling project is not done, there is another wall to remove and a leaking pipe to repair in there somewhere.

2. Our weariness is not just the “sweat of our brow” physical weariness. There is a great weariness that comes from the fact that often we must do things we don’t really want to do in order to “make a living.” That might be our job itself, it might be cleaning our house, or it might be all sorts of things. These often are a burden of an emotional sort.
3. And our weariness is often spiritual. Sin and its burden of guilt can be crushingly heavy. And if we don’t feel that burden that is not good news either. It simply means we are dead, crushed under its weight, numb because all the blood has been squeezed out of us. Unforgiven sin is an invisible but crushing burden.
4. In short we are broken and live in a broken world which often means that we are forced into labors and efforts which would have been alien to Adam in the garden. We need rest but our whole life tells us that we need to work harder and do more. Efficiency! It cries out to us.
5. Our solutions to these problems are usually even worse than the problems. The rules and the systems which we devise to alleviate the weariness promise relief but often simply result in another sort of weariness. The need to tithe my mint and spices seems a little excessive. Getting chastised for rubbing hands together to get a few kernels of wheat to chew on while I am hungry seems a little over the top too, but are we any better? My neighbor has declared to me that her husband’s family has some good Christians in it, but the rest drink beer.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus gives us rest, real rest. He carries the loads which we cannot carry, the burden of our sin has been borne to a cross. The standard of heavenly perfection to which we could never attain has been given to us.
2. Jesus does not want our begrudging or onerous service. He needs no act of service outside of the relationship. He is God, after all, and can do whatever he needs to do. But he loves a cheerful giver, he receives our acts of love and worship in much the same way that a lover delights to find an act of kindness done by the beloved. He does not want to think that these were done out of some sense of duty or obligation. It spoils everything, he would in fact rather you not do them if you feel burdened by them. (Is that too scary to preach? Only give what you want to give! Will our treasurer gasp if we say that?)
3. His gift also means that my other burdens become lighter. The job that is not really what I want to do becomes an occasion for the light to shine through me. I may not always like the tasks which it asks of me, but I can look forward to the chance to be a child of God in

this place, in small ways and large ways and know that my beloved Jesus smiles upon my efforts even when they don't work. I am free from the burden of "success." That belongs to him.

4. Jesus was a carpenter. His hands were calloused from working with planes and saws and chisels. He probably built houses. He knows what it means to be exhausted. He is not sitting on some high throne having mercy on the "little people." He has become one of us, the least of us, that in returning to the majesty of heaven and the rest of Eden, he brings us with him. This is not a story for the few or the elite, but his gift is a gift given to the poor and the common man, it is a gift given to the little and the least. This is a blue collar gospel!
5. God also enjoys peace and rest. He rested after his creation and in the cool of the day he went for walks with Adam and Eve.

Here are a few ideas that have remained somewhat undeveloped – should we do of these or another this week?

- A. Jesus has come to bear your burden. The real question of life is not what you do, but who you are and especially whose you are. Jesus has very good news for you. He has taken up the yoke of humanity and born its burden with us. He has yoked us to himself. It is an uneven yoking, the doing is all his. We are with him on that journey.
- B. Basking in the presence of Jesus. Have you ever just stopped, unplugged everything and had Jesus hold you in his arms? The very busy-ness of our lives often conspires with our enemy to keep us from the truth. Jesus loves to hold you close, he loves to be with you as he is with you now. He knows what it is to work, he was a carpenter remember. He probably built houses with his father. Now he comes to you to be with you. This meal makes you his own person. He will be with you, part of you, in you, one with you in reality. That is a gracious presence. This is not big brother watching over you lest you sin, but this is the one who died for all those sins delighting in the person he created once and re-created in grace so that he may recreate with you now.

### **Sermon Ideas:**

1. "Real Peace" Matthew 11:25-30 (That the Spirit of God would lift from the shoulders of the hearer the many burdens we mistakenly bear – burdens of guilt, burdens of responsibility, burdens of meeting divine expectations, and much more – enabling the hearer to enjoy true peace.)

I will give you rest. Jesus calls the weary and offers them peace, a burden and yoke that is light. This should be a message which appeals to us today. But while the idea of rest is always welcome, the real thing is sometimes both elusive and not entirely pleasant. We

like to think that we are important enough that we should be busy. There is a measure of fear in this as well. If I can be absent from my job for more than two weeks, perhaps I am not so indispensable to my employer as I thought. When we translate this thinking to spiritual matters, one observes that there is a hubris, an arrogance which lies at the heart of all of us. We like to think we are so important that we are indispensable, if not to God, at least to our own salvation. But nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, we are a hindrance to our own salvation, not a help. But that is no obstacle for God.

This sermon will seek to pull the hearer away from their pride first, and its manifestations in works righteousness, in some trusted piety (I am really sorry for my sins – so God loves me or God loves me because I go to church, or perhaps he loves me more) or any other such labor. God’s love is freely and fully a gift. You cannot earn this. All the labor to earn this is so much wasted effort. It is winding a watch which is powered by a battery. It does no good.

And so we are given to rest in the loving hands of God.

This sermon is subtly simple. Don’t try to make it more complex. I think this is a good time for a narrative, but you will need to own that narrative. Have you ever done something which you just did not need to do? I really did once spend six months diligently winding a watch which had a battery. Have you ever walked into a situation dreading all that needed to be done and found someone had already done it? Tell that story.

2. “I am trapped – Who will rescue me?” Romans 7:14-25a (That the hearer be convicted of their own predicament and turned through the work of the Spirit to their only solution – Jesus the Christ who rescues us from this body of death.)

This sermon succeeds if the hearer at the end of it thankfully and joyfully utters Paul’s words of praise at the end of the reading. God has saved me from this reality in which I am unable to help myself.

Building on last week’s theme, this sermon just won’t let go of the terrible predicament we are in with regard to our own sinfulness. Good intentions are not enough. American Christianity has long succumbed to a sort of semi-pelagianism which asserts that if we just have the right intention, then it is OK. We have not really sinned if we meant well. This is a self-deceptive lie. Sin is still sin, even if you meant otherwise. The wrong thing done for the right reason or the right thing done for the wrong reason both serve Satan’s purposes. What is more, when we get right down to it, our intentions usually are not all that good either.

Our wills themselves are corrupted and succumb to sin. If someone like the Apostle Paul can struggle with this and confess this to be true about himself, what does it say about me? I cannot be sanctified this way, not really so, not truly holy. I really have to admit

that this is not going to work. Without a true sanctification, I don't belong in heaven, I am not fit for God's presence.

Paul found two opposing forces at work in his members. He is the baptized and regenerate man who on one hand wants to please God, he wants to do the right things, yet again and again, he finds that he does not do them. He is trapped in a body of death.

One of my friends in ministry was an avid golfer. He insisted that Paul must have had a slice. He knew what he needed to do to correct it, but every time he took a swing at the ball his body reverted to the old ways and the ball would gracefully curve into the water hazard to the right.

Who will rescue him? Praise be to Christ! He rescues us from this miserable trap into which Satan seduced our first parents and we have been ensnared ever since. Here is the proclamation of the Gospel today. I am utterly helpless before my very nature. I am not a good person. But Jesus is a good person, he has become one with me, and he is not helpless before my nature. He wins the victory over my very self that I cannot win.

The preacher of this sermon will want to be careful. Paul does not develop this idea to mean that we are spiritually incapable or that we should simply sit idly by and expect Jesus to do all. He speaks of a Christ who liberates now and who renews our minds through the Spirit (12:1ff.) We cannot turn this into an excuse for our misbehavior or a license to do nothing. But we do offer people the promise that God works through fundamentally broken folks just like us and just like Paul. He does free us, he did so in baptism.

3. Prisoners of Hope (OT and Gospel – That the Spirit of God would engender and strengthen hope in God's promises within the hearer which blesses the whole of life.)

We have been hearing some strange words from our Bible lately. A few weeks ago Paul called us slaves of righteousness. Today Jesus speaks of a kingdom given over to children and Zechariah speaks of prisoners of hope.

This sermon will want to play with that word hope. Missionaries to India have told me that they can spot the Christians walking down the street among the Dalits of India. They have hope. I have seen this too in the more familiar surroundings of the U. S. I have watched a woman whose body was wracked by cancer smile throughout difficult days of treatment and the process of dying. She had hope which death, pain, and suffering could not conquer.

That hope has a specific content. It is not just a warm and fuzzy "hope" feeling which one can romanticize and turn into a generic thing. We have turned the word into a weak thing. Hope has become for many of us a sort of wishful thought, but not something we would expect to happen. (See the notes above under the OT reading.) The hope of which we preach has a specific object. It is an expectation in Christ. Faith, the relationship of which

Paul is speaking in Romans does some very important things. That relationship engenders a great love for God in us. Faith also gives us to trust in God. But today we will want to note that faith also gives us to hope in God, to expect something of him, to look at the promises he makes and count on them. That is hope.

You may need to define hope. Most will think it is a feeling of confidence. Hope is an expectation based upon a promise given. Hope hears the words of God and delights, even though we cannot see all those things right now, they are sure. God has said it. We hope in him.

One might connect this to Paul's words. He knelt at the communion rail, held that wafer up and seemed to say, "God, you promised that when I eat this thing you would come inside me and that would make a difference. I need that and I am counting on that!"

How are we prisoners of that hope? The preacher could take this in a number of ways. We could be prisoners who hope in God. In that sense, we are folks who await deliverance from our God. We are prisoners, true, but we have hope. I think the Dalits of India would resonate with that sort of a message. But I wonder if we might not also preach that we are held captive by hope itself. Paul turned slavery into a Gospel term for us a few weeks ago, can we do the same thing with prison? Does hope hold us in a sweet captivity, has it grabbed us, and does it now bind us to Christ.

I am not preaching some sort of Calvinist "once saved, always saved" drivel. That is no Gospel. We could break these bonds and re-enter the world of human despair, but is that really freedom? I suppose we could see it as such and some have cast atheism as just such a freedom. Yet, does the Dalit really go back to being untouchable after God has touched him in the waters of Baptism?

This sermon is using the term as a rhetorical device. We don't want to make too much of it. But it is arresting and bids us think about hope in a completely different way and gives us a means to proclaim the promises of Jesus to God's people today.