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Alexandria, Virginia  
July 3, 2011

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

## LEARNING TO REST

I have truly enjoyed this week. I can't remember the last time that I have spent a week, every day, undistracted, and able to go and look back at what a passage really means. So I want to begin the sermon today with the ending. I like my sermon so much and the way that it concludes that I want you to have a taste of where I am headed, if I can: Jesus says to us, no matter how much you pray, no matter how much you read your Bible, no matter how much you believe, none of that will matter, if you are still in the habit of excluding people, of failing to practice the welcome that his Father gave him and he has given you.

Jesus stands before us not as the Savior that we want or even the Savior that we learn, but Jesus stands before us as the Savior that we need. What is happening here is that Christ gets their goat. They are sure that they are the ones who can tell Jesus how to behave—that they can control this miracle worker who claims to be the Messiah. They are certain that if they only inflict enough constraints—enough rules and boundaries—they will be able to limit his ability to influence the masses. Even the disciples do everything within their power to control this Christ who has come in their midst, and what does Jesus say? “John the Baptist was too holy for you, and now I am too flamboyant. You call me the party child. But in fact, you act more like spoiled children than my followers.”

Jesus and John both walked faithfully, but they are as opposite as a funeral and a wedding. They couldn't be more different. Their reputations couldn't be more different. Their practice of the faith is indeed like two polar extremes. One, John is the true Calvinist. He has denied himself any pleasure. He is the epitome of a new ager—I mean, after all, what is greener than eating locusts and honey, right? You don't get more organic than that! And Jesus is indeed the one who includes all the wrong people. He is the opposite in many ways of the life style that John the Baptist has chosen. Jesus associated with people who were outside the circle of the church. You know, when they call him a drunkard and a glutton, it is not just an insult, it is justification for having him stoned according to Deuteronomy. And none of this should surprise us. We all are in the habit of doing the same thing, aren't we?

We are about to enter another political season where the mode of operation will be, don't attack the message, attack the messenger, right? And we do the same thing in the church. If somebody has a different theological opinion than us, if someone interprets scripture a little differently than the way we interpret it, we don't talk about the passage, we talk about the interpreter, don't we? Attack the message? No. We attack the messenger.

Two weeks ago I encouraged believers in this sanctuary that if they felt stuck or stagnant in their faith to give up what they were doing in favor of taking a different path. You would not believe the interpretations I have heard from that message. I want us to consider this morning what really does bring us joy. If it's not how much we pray, or read the Bible, or even how much we believe, what is it? It is when we are yoked, hooked together by the grace of Christ, working, accomplishing, active, being something that is greater than our own ideas, moving beyond autonomy. When we finally reject being consumers of faith, investors in religious practice always expecting a return on our faithfulness—when we stop all that, we are indeed at the place that Christ described himself in this passage. When Jesus says: "They played the flute and you wouldn't dance," he in essence says, "You were invited to a wedding, and you wouldn't go." And when they wailed and mourned, Jesus is saying: "And they invited you to a wake; you wouldn't go there either."

I still believe there are some of us who are stagnant this morning—stuck—and we are going to believe what we believe, no matter what, until we surrender to a power greater than ourselves. Jesus says: "This isn't child's play; this isn't a game that you can walk away from because no one will do everything exactly as you say. This isn't optional. You have to take on the yoke that I have taken on. Those who would serve have to learn how to be last. Those who would love have to learn the meaning of sacrifice."

Sometimes I think ministers are like one of two bosses. We have all worked for these kinds of people or worked with them. The first sees a worker and says to the worker, "Today, we are going to clear the stones from this field, and if you don't clear enough stones, you won't get paid. I'm going to stand up here and watch closely to make sure that your work is satisfactory, that you do the prescribed amount of stone clearing, and if you fail, you won't be paid." Did it ever feel that way to you? You volunteer to do something for the church and take on a responsibility, and you feel that no good deed goes unpunished? Do you ever feel that way?—that you give and give only to have someone say, "That's not enough?"

The second boss is the kind that we all love to work with. He says, "I have great news. We have a task to do, and we are equal shareholders investing in its success. I'm going to work right beside you in this field and together we are going to clear the stones. We are going to accomplish our assignment by cooperating with one another. Your effort and my position as supervisor will make it such that in the end the world is different—this field will be different. And the good news is, it won't matter how able you are—what will matter is if we work side by side. And by the way, Jesus says because he is Lord, our futures and our salaries are secure." When was the last time in our culture an employer said, "No matter what, your future and your salary are secure?"

You see, Jesus doesn't give to us the way the world gives. Jesus says when we are yoked together as the body of Christ, we are in fact pulling in the same direction and there will be no time for any of us to waste talking about one another's short comings, complaining that someone else needs to change his or her priorities. When we are cooperating with Christ, we are so busy building up that there simply isn't any time for

tearing down. Our days are punctuated with acknowledging who Jesus is and how differently we live now in relationship to one another. Yes, John's approach to faith was very different from Christ's. In fact, it was so different that when he saw Christ, he wasn't even sure he was the Messiah.

How are we living today? How are we approaching this endeavor we call New Beginnings—looking at who we are and how others see us, evaluating what really matters in our midst? Let me reassure you that this is still a Presbyterian church and that no one is going to force you to believe. No one will attempt to manipulate the way you think. But we will, in fact, look together for faithful response to a new world and a very different culture than when this church first began. Jesus says: "I am giving you a task and I expect you to practice wisdom and understanding, judgment and courage, knowledge and reverence, for what I have planned."

I wonder if Jen mentioned the spiritual fruits last week—or gifts of the faith—we said we were going to talk about all summer. I have heard great things about the sermon. You see, when God created the world, our purpose was set. And today, Jesus is telling us, no matter how much you pray, no matter how much you read your Bible, no matter how much you believe, none of that will matter. It won't count for anything if you ignore people who are hurting. If you don't believe that is what Jesus is saying, look back at the 19<sup>th</sup> verse: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." You see, we can't just say we are disciples. We have to live as followers of Christ's example and Christ's spirit. We can't just say we love Jesus and then go out and exclude one another. We have to learn hospitality and welcome—not on our terms, but on Christ's terms. Not like spoiled children who say it's either my way or hit the highway, but like those who believe, instead, Jesus really is the Savior that we need so desperately in order to be his church—his kingdom coming always in our midst.

Thank you for often showing me that acceptance. Treat one another the way you treat me and, look out, for the Lord will be in our midst. Amen.