Breathing space
Matthew 11: 28-30
August 9, 2015

Closets that overflow and basements packed to the limit are OK. But overstuffed and cluttered lives are not. If our calendars are so full that there is no time to rest and if our finances are so tight that there is no room for error and if our family relationships are so cluttered that everyone is going in a hundred different directions all at the same time so we never see each other – then we have a problem. You may be saying to yourself, but that’s just how life is or how it is right now. My friends, please hear this, “it’s not OK.” God did not create us to live life at the edge of our limits. God created us to live spacious lives with breathing space.

Breathing space is that space between the busyness of life and our limits. Come on, we all have limits. We have limits on our time, limits on our money, and limits on our emotions, which mean there are limits on our ability to relate in healthy ways with the people around us. While we all have different limits, our limits are real. There is a point when we have to stop. My friends, when we live right up to the edge of our limits, we can’t fully enjoy the life God has given us. So this morning, let’s consider our need to create space in our lives to take a breath and rejuvenate.

The reason breathing space is important is because, without it, our stress level goes up and our ability to cope goes down. You know this is true. When we don’t have the time to do all the things we want or need to do, we get stressed. When we are rushed with our families and have to cut corners at work, we get stressed. When we don’t have an extra dollar at the end of the month and our credit cards are all maxed out, we get stressed. When we try to live life at the very limits of our capabilities, it creates stress. Finding some breathing space can bring peace, refreshment and relaxation.

Now, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. So, if making space to breathe is so important, why don’t we plan for it? Why do we live life at the pace we do when we know it is not healthy? Why do we fill our time to the point that every minute is scheduled without scheduling any flex time for the unexpected? In some cases, we overextend ourselves because of our feelings of obligation. These are the things that we are supposed to do. These are the things we have always done. These are the things that others expect of us. Or, maybe even, the things that we expect of ourselves. I’ll admit that there are times when I make life difficult for myself because I’ve taken on too much or because I’m avoiding something that needs attention or because I’m giving too much energy to something that I don’t need to be giving that energy. I recognize that I’m capable of filling the breathing space I might have had by manufacturing my own complications rather than waiting for the ones that come around on their own.

Andy Stanley wrote that the underlying reason we live at an unsustainable pace is fear. First, there is the fear of missing out on something. We pack so much into our schedules because we are gluttons; we want to do it all. (Maybe there’s good reason why some consider gluttony the seventh deadly sin.) We pass this behavior on to our children and grandchildren as we load their lives full of sports and dance and music because we are afraid they might miss out on some experience that will benefit them. In a world where we can instantly hear about everyone else’s experience and see what fun they are having, keeping up with the Jones’s is no longer a fancy new car; we suddenly have the drive to do everything everyone else is doing. We are afraid of missing out on something wonderful that will absolutely enhance our lives.
Sometimes the fear that pushes us to the limit is the fear of losing something. If we don’t work all the overtime we can and volunteer to take on that extra project, we are afraid we might lose our job or not be in line for the next promotion. If we don’t take the extra job, we are afraid we can’t pay our expenses or we may lose the ability to retire when we want. Sometimes the reason we do so much and fill our lives to the limit is the fear of losing face. We will do just about everything possible and say “yes” to everyone because we want people to think we are caring or talented or a true friend. It’s interesting to me that if you are homeless, you are directed to a shelter. If you are without food, you are directed to a food bank. And yet, if you are without breathing space, if you are without time … you are often given something else to do. We struggle to keep moving at an unsustainable pace because we think that all we are doing will make life better. But what happens is that all our activity and the stress it brings is keeping us from what matters most in life. This is important because if we go through life afraid of missing something or losing something, then in the end, we are going to find that we have actually missed or lost what’s of greatest value in life. So we need to name and confront that which is driving our schedules, spending, or relationships and find ways to slow our lives down; to give ourselves some breathing space.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus says to each one of us, “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 light.”

Sounds wonderful, and yet, when you think about it, Jesus is talking in oxymorons: an "easy yoke" a "light burden." But this is what Jesus does all the time. He seems to like to take the accepted meanings for words and turn them inside out and upside down. Back in Jesus’ day, the Romans had become weary, depressed, burdened; not because their lives were harder than other people, but because they had worn themselves out with their distractions. To put it succinctly, they had confused liberty and license. They had fallen into a bondage to their own lower instincts of self-centered gratification, indulgence, and extravagance. Jesus came to bring liberation, true freedom. Of course, true freedom has a price and Jesus did not hide the price. "Take my yoke upon you."

I have to admit that it’s been a challenge for me to buy into the notion that Jesus’ yoke is easy and his burden light. I’ve seen a lot of evidence that suggests the contrary. But I wonder if much of the difficulty, heaviness, and exhaustion that we experience in ourselves and that we witness in others comes because we are making our own way and making it difficult for ourselves rather than tending our connection with the one who wants to make things easier for us. I wonder if, perhaps, what Jesus meant was not that walking with him is uncomplicated, but rather that when we focus on our relationship with Jesus, the road opens before us with less resistance and less striving on our part. My friends, we learn from Jesus that we can find rest for our souls by being gentle and humble with ourselves.

Now, I’ll also admit that I’m not all that comfortable with Jesus’ use of the image of a yoke. At first thought, a yoke connotes bondage, servitude, and the restriction of freedom and choice. In scanning the Web for images of yokes, however, I realized that I was imagining a single-user yoke, one that someone who has power over us places upon us, something that we have to pull alone. What I found more often on the Web were images of double yokes, designed for working animals to pull in tandem. How might it be to imagine this as the kind of yoke that Jesus was talking about; a yoke that we don’t have to pull alone, a yoke that he wears with us? A yoke not of servitude, not of bondage, but of connection, a way of being in a relationship with
Christ that makes our work easier, not more difficult. It’s this kind of relationship, this connection with the Christ who labors alongside us, that makes it possible for us to let go of our fears and expectations; to distinguish between the urgent and the necessary; to end the race to prove ourselves, to accept ourselves as Christ’s co-workers with particular purpose, and, Lord help us, to give ourselves some breathing space. We are not doing it all on our own. We do not have to do it all. As we are so closely yoked with Christ, it becomes more possible to discern how to move in directions that will provide energy and wisdom to sort out our lives and recognize our limits as well as our gifts, passion, and purpose.

Truth is, we always bind ourselves, however subtly, to something: people, places, habits, possessions, beliefs, ways of being in the world. To what or whom are you yoked right now? Have you yoked yourself or have you allowed the yoke to be placed upon you by others? Does the yoke connect you with the power and freedom that God offers you? How might Christ be inviting you to live and work in closer relationship with him?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "a comforting promise to which many of us turn when our burdens seem impossible to bear...a lighter yoke, lighter because it yokes us with one who is greater than we are, and with whose strong help we can bear any burden...[these words] assure us that those who please God are not those who can carry the heaviest loads alone but those who are willing to share their loads, who are willing to share their yokes by entering into relationship with the one whose invitation is a standing one...". My friends, in your living and your laboring, may you find deep relationship, breathing space, and Sabbath rest.