

St. Paul's, Concord
November 4 & 5, 2018
All Saints – John 11:32-44

This past Thursday we celebrated All Saints' Day – which is such an important day in our Church calendar that we're celebrating it again today! And today is also the final instalment of our series on the Way of Love. Over these past weeks we've journeyed together through Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, and Go and now we come to the seventh step: Rest.

The prayer of Commendation from the burial service in our Book of Common Prayer includes these words:

Receive him into the arms of your mercy,
into the blessed rest of everlasting peace,
and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

“The blessed rest of everlasting peace” and “the glorious company of the saints in light.” As we focus on the saints who've inspired us over the centuries, the martyrs who gave up their lives for their faith, and the holy men and women who were shining examples of what it means to serve God in a world that's overly concerned with serving itself, we have this wonderful reminder that their reward is blessed rest, everlasting peace, and glorious light.

But our Episcopal tradition teaches us that it's not only those who have departed this life whom we count as saints. Saints live and breathe among us – in fact we can *all* be Saints of God as that familiar hymn reminds us:

“They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.”

Lesbia Scott, 1929

And, although “blessed rest” is one of the promises of eternal life in heaven, it is also a necessity for people of faith living in this world.

At our 10:00 service, when Drew will be baptizing baby Flynn, we'll have a wonderful visual aid for the importance of rest. Babies spend most of their time sleeping – and during that time, their bodies are growing; their brains are developing; their dexterity is advancing.

Babies need rest to become strong and capable, the best they can be as they continue to mature physically. People of faith, walking the Way of Love, need rest to become strong and capable, the best we can be as we continue to mature spiritually.

I have another visual aid for you today, and it's me myself. You may have heard that I'm having some surgery next week and that I'll be away from church for a while. I'm certainly not the only one here who's had to take time out for some medical event. And when we're in that situation, we all know what's happening in our bodies when we take the time to rest. Rest is essential for physical healing.

Rest is essential for spiritual healing too. We'd be wrong to think that a life of faith is all peaches and cream. There are plenty of treats along the way but there is a lot of hard, demanding work as well. Jesus calls us into places of hurt and need, and facing the realities of a broken and suffering world can be heartbreaking. It's soul-destroying to witness the effects of senseless cruelty and violence – as we did last week for the umpteenth time. It's exhausting to enter the fray, day after day, to speak out against injustice, to give a voice to the voiceless, and to meet the needs of society's victims.

Like a patient recovering from surgery, we need time to recuperate from the actions we take as people of faith. We need time to breathe, to sleep, to enjoy the company of loved ones, to play and laugh. These are simple things but they represent the abundant life that God offers to us all – and they're all the more precious when they follow on from a period of faithful, committed, Kingdom work. And, by the way, Bishop Rob is about to take his three-month sabbatical. It's good to know that he is taking good care of himself!

Jesus gave us the example of withdrawing from the hustle and bustle of everyday life to spend quiet time in his Father's presence. Those were times when Jesus was restored, refreshed, and strengthened to return to the work he was sent to do. When we take the time to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of our own lives, to seek out God's presence and spend time in prayer and meditation, we too are restored and refreshed and strengthened to return to the work of being effective Christians.

Here's another way that my current situation serves as a great example of the seventh step in the Way of Love. None of our parish ministries will stop while I'm away from St. Paul's, over the next few weeks. As I said in my letter in the Weekly Update, my clergy colleagues, our wonderful staff, Vestry, and Ministry Directors, and a huge team of lay ministers, will ensure that this faith community is as active and effective as ever. Every aspect of the Way of Love, of turning, learning, praying, worshiping, blessing, and going, will be sustained, and lives will continue to be touched and transformed. This is one of the most gratifying and inspiring characteristics of the Body of Christ in the world. We are never alone. And when one part of the Body is at rest, other parts of the body come into play. Together we constitute a holy system, mutually supportive, interdependent, and capable of powerful ministry as a result.

There *are* times when we take rest together. Examples of this are the annual vestry retreat, and the women's retreat we introduced last year. The results of our recent spiritual inventory survey indicate a desire to go more deeply into guided spiritual growth – and thank you so much for taking part in that survey. As our RenewalWorks team formulates a response to those results, it may be that parish-wide retreats will be part of their plan.

When members of a faith community seek rest and recreation together, it's a wonderful opportunity to build up spiritual strength – both individually and corporately. Intentional group retreat time invites the sharing of stories, questions, and concerns; it allows us to play and laugh together, to get to know one another better in an atmosphere of relaxation, of *re-creation*.

At its heart, rest is *all about* re-creation. That deliberate time spent apart from the world, that time of connection with God, that time of growth and development, of healing and strengthening, that time of lightheartedness and renewal, it all brings us closer to being the person God created us to be.

Before I finish, I want to direct our attention to the passage from John's gospel. I started out by describing what awaits God's children when they depart this life and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Lazarus *didn't* depart this life, though – or at least he did so only temporarily. But even if he didn't enter the "blessed rest of *everlasting* peace" at that time, Lazarus certainly was resting! Not only that, but we know that Jesus allowed his friend to remain in the tomb for two days longer than necessary before travelling to Bethany to resurrect him. There's no doubt about it, Lazarus had a good four-day rest before he emerged. So, I wonder, what was God doing during those four days? What kind of growth, or restoration, or preparation was taking place in Lazarus' body and spirit?

He would die again one day, but during the years between his first death and his final one, surely Lazarus had important work to do as an apostle of Christ. It was shortly after Jesus raised Lazarus that he himself spent time in the tomb and rose again. There was a message of life and salvation to proclaim – and Lazarus, who experienced rebirth firsthand was an obvious person to spread that good news.

Rest isn't just a good thing. It isn't simply a nice way to spend a rainy afternoon or a trip to the beach. Rest is ordained by God as an essential part of walking the Way of Love. It is only through rest that we discover the ability and the motivation to be disciples and apostles of Christ – and the energy to turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, and go.

May God bless us all and grant us holy rest.