

TEXT: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
THEME: I will give you rest
SUBJECT: The image of God
TITLE: Soul Rest

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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Many people are accustomed to going through their days, says Roberta Bondi, continually reproaching themselves for what they perceive to be their failures: “I never get up early enough to have some quiet time before the demands of the day press in upon me; I am so lazy,” as well as “I cannot believe I yelled at the children; I am a terrible mother/father,” or “I never stick with my exercise and diet plan; I am so impulsive.” Overlay these feelings of personal failure with a pandemic, the boogaloo movement (folk itching for a second America Civil War), a recession, and depression easily bleeds into despair.

When we judge ourselves in this way, we take on the role of God against ourselves, says Roberta Bondi. The problem is we are not treating ourselves as God in fact treats us. We are exercising violence against ourselves, while God treats all of us gently, never forcing us or bullying us, or riding roughshod over us. This may come as news to many of us who, at least subconsciously, live with a god more like a drill sergeant than like a gentle teacher.

In the Gospel reading for today we hear Jesus say, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give your rest. Take my yoke upon you, and **learn from me**; for I am **gentle** and **humble** in heart (accommodating in heart - Hart’s translation), and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, my burden is light.”

The wisdom of the 4th century desert monastics reveals the way a humble heart heals. It is not possible for us to recover our sense of well-being, to find rest for our souls, by harshness and severity. In the imagery of the monastic tradition, “demon cannot drive out demon.” Violence does not work on a practical level. Through gentleness and humility God draws us to God’s self.

It can take a great deal of vigilance to follow the wisdom of the desert in this matter. Our inner critic protests: Is this talk of gentleness but a gloss for permissiveness? Perhaps we will stop taking our own failings seriously and become self-indulgent, narcissists who care little for the welfare of others. Perhaps we will become totally irresponsible if we do not exercise a certain roughness toward ourselves.

We need to cultivate the discipline of giving up violence to the self in exchange for God’s gentleness if we are to grow in love for self and neighbor. If we remember we are giving up such violence against the self out of respect for the image of God within us, out of gratitude toward God for the gift of the image, and out of knowledge that love of God and others cannot grow from self-hatred, we can mute the inner critic long enough to glimpse the rest our souls desire.

If we relax our grip on “shoulds” and “oughts,” what will the neighbors think? In the first part of the Gospel reading Jesus confronts the judgment of the crowd with withering sarcasm: “You are like children sitting in the town square calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” John (the Baptist) lived a strict ascetic life and you said he had a demon. I (Jesus) came eating and drinking and you called me a “glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

John and Jesus lived very different lives; John was a “monk,” Jesus was a “party goer.” Both lives were faithful expressions of the image of God within them. Neither gained the approval of the crowd; each gained the approval of God.

Be assured that if you act as faithfully as you know how in keeping with the image of God within you, the “crowd” will find fault with you. The crowd, those who go along to get along, cannot tolerate authentic lives. Because the crowd has sold its soul for fame, fortune, and power, because the crowd has sacrificed the good, the true, the beautiful on the altar of “success,” it must condemn authentic witnesses to transcendent realities.

Jesus invites us to learn from him. Why? Because his yoke is easy; his burden is light. The yoke of self-condemnation depresses us, brings us to our knees; the burden of violence against oneself crushes even the strongest among us. The yoke of conformity to the ways of the crowd creates self-crippling contortions; the burden of betraying our true self breaks our backs.

We cannot escape a yoke; we cannot be burden free. But we can accept a yoke that fits us, a discipline that empowers us for the work we are uniquely gifted to do. We can accept a burden worthy of the image of God within, a purpose to fulfill that gives meaning to our lives.

A tree gives glory to God, writes Thomas Merton, by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying God. It “consents,” so to speak, to God’s creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.

The more the tree is like itself, the more it is like God. If it tried to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give God less glory.

No two created things are exactly alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary, the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.

You, in your individuality, with your own characteristics and qualities and inviolable identity, give glory to God by being precisely who God created you to be here and now. By consenting to the unique manifestation of God’s creative love in you as in no other person before or after you,

by consenting to God's infinite art manifest in you as in no other person before or after you, you consent to the image of God within you and find rest for your soul!

PRAYER: Richard Rolle of Hampole (1300-1349), writer composing in both English and Latin, a Bible translator, and a hermit.

“God's Love”

O Holy Spirit, Who breathes
where You will, breathe into me
and draw me to Yourself.

Invest the nature You have shaped
with gifts so flowing with honey that,
from intense joy in Your sweetness,

this clay might turn from lesser things,
that it may accept (as You give them)
spiritual gifts, and through pleasing

jubilant, it may melt, entirely,
in holy love, reaching finally out
to touch the Uncreated Light.