

“All Ye Who Are Weary”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 11:16-19
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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As your pastor, your spiritual and emotional wellbeing are very important to me, so I’m hopeful that you’ve all been good Christians this month and gone to see the new movie *Wonder Woman*. Never neglect to feed the soul, I always say. I mean, the movie has been out since the beginning of June, so, like me, you’ve probably seen it more than once by now.

There’s this scene near the beginning of the movie—I’m sure you remember it. Diana has just learned about the huge world war going on outside the safety and serenity of her small island, and she is compelled to go and help, only her mother doesn’t want her to leave. She is afraid of what will happen to her daughter if she goes. She says to her, “If you choose to leave, you may never return,” but Diana replies, “Who will I be if I stay?” This, I think, is Diana’s moment of rebirth. When she chooses to leave the island it is the moment she chooses to be *Wonder Woman*, regardless of what it might cost her.

Her choice reminds me of Theodore Roosevelt’s famous quote about “the man in the arena,” though the man in this arena was a woman. Roosevelt said, “It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Roosevelt could probably tell you that there are usually more people who sit in the stands than play the game. There are usually more people who stay on the island than join in the worldwide struggle for peace.

What Roosevelt says about the critic is really not so different from what Jesus says in Matthew 11, though Jesus chooses less competitive-sounding metaphors. “To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

In other words, Jesus is saying: “You are a generation who does not enter the arena, does not join in celebration or in grief. You never leave the island. You never join the fight. You sit back and critique. You observe from a distance and offer judgments. Rather than participate, you disengage. You feign engagement by being a critic, a worrywart, a compiler of complaints.

“Nothing satisfies you. When John came refraining from food and drink, you said he had a demon. When the Son of Man came, eating and drinking, you said he was a glutton and a drunk. We are always too much of one thing and not enough of another in your eyes, and isn’t that convenient, because as long as you can find *something* wrong with us, you never have to join us on our mission.”

Jesus notes that it doesn’t matter whether it is fasting or feasting, whether it’s dancing or crying, this generation remains aloof and unmoved. One of my many favorite things about Wonder Woman is the strength of her empathy. Many times throughout the film she is visibly moved to tears by the suffering of others, and her tears are never a weakness. They are part of what makes her who she is; her tears are what drive her to use her powers for good. By contrast, the critic does *not* cry. The critic *complains*, and there’s a big difference.

Now, when I say “critic,” I’m not talking about someone who offers constructive feedback when they are asked for it. I’m talking about the critic who offers opinions and advice but not labor, the person who passes out grades but never does their own homework.

It is interesting how different John’s style is from Jesus’ style, and yet they are kindred spirits, loyal and devoted to one another. Jesus does not criticize John for staying out in the wilderness where it would be difficult for the sick and lame to get to him. He does not criticize John for spending his time preaching and dunking people in rivers when he could be feeding the hungry. In fact, Jesus honors John’s work by coming out to the Jordan himself and being a participant in it, by receiving baptism from John even though John says, “You are the one who ought to baptize me.” Jesus does not criticize John for being too eccentric or ascetic. He doesn’t tell John he needs to be more relevant.

Likewise John doesn’t criticize Jesus for being too indulgent. He doesn’t say, “My goodness, what were you thinking at that wedding in Cana? How could you waste your power on parties? Don’t you know I’m out here sweating under my camel skin clothes in the desert and eating locust?” He does not say that. Jesus and John accept one another as uniquely gifted by God and they do not waste time fussing about their differences.

Some of the people around them, however, are a different story. They analyze and they gossip and they condemn. They assign motives and intentions and vices to these men. They assume they know the true story. They assume they have the authority to make proclamations about Jesus’ true character and about his flaws and weaknesses. They even call him a sinner.

“Clearly he has a problem with alcohol,” they whisper. “Clearly he could afford to drop a few pounds. Did you notice he ate two desserts? The man has no boundaries. My goodness, he keeps company with tax collectors and sinners! He really ought to spend more time with us instead of them. Do you think that whole virgin birth thing is getting to his head? If you ask me, Mary should never have told him about the wise men and shepherds and angels. He’s a bit too well known for his own good. They say he has prostitutes falling at his feet and touching him with their hair! It’s shameful, just shameful. Poor boy probably doesn’t know how to handle it. He’s so young after all. Thirty years old—a mere child. Very little experience, that one.”

All this busy chatter, of course, is a distraction from the real work to which they are being called and to which Jesus is daily inviting them.

You might expect Jesus would be fed up with all this gossip instead of good deeds, and he is. If you read all of chapter eleven, he has some harsh things to say about that sort of behavior. But I am more curious about how he ends his speech, because after pointing out the harsh truth to them about their lack of engagement, he says this:

“Come to me, all you who 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 of your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Instead of telling them to get moving, Jesus invites them to rest. It is the very opposite of what you would expect him to say. You would think he would tell them to get their tails in gear. To take a stand. To do something. But he does not say, “Come to me, all you are lazy or paralyzed by fear, and I will give you work to do.” He says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” It turns out God doesn’t actually ask us to be super-women and super-men who can power through all adversity all the time.

I think Jesus can see past their criticism and their slander to the root of the things. He knows cynicism isn’t likely the real problem; rather, cynicism is a symptom of exhaustion. He suspects they are cranky because they so, so weary.

Have you ever picked a fight with your spouse or your sibling or your friend, and then realized you weren’t that angry at them after all; you were just hungry and tired? Maybe when we are getting overly critical with one another, it is because we are so very tired. Maybe we are overwhelmed by all this negative energy, and the easiest, most accessible outlet, is to complain. Maybe I’m only speaking for myself here, or maybe you can relate.

I know I can sure get tired of the news. I can get tired of politics and failed communication and misunderstandings and false assumptions and fractured relationships and not enough time and too much stress and grrr, technology. I can get tired of change and tired of instability. Tired of uncertainty and tired of waiting. Tired of losing people I love and losing faith in people I trusted. Tired of broken appliances and doctors appointments and the challenges of loving anyone well. Tired of car problems and money problems and health problems and family problems and work problems and world problems. Tired of traffic and deadlines and foreign policy. Tired of tragedy and tired of guilt. Tired of shame and grief and trauma and loneliness, aching muscles, aching hearts, disappointments. Tired of failures, tired of fearing I’ll be a disappointment. Tired of feeling all the feelings; tired of not feeling enough joy. Tired of missing out; tired of moving too fast; tired of being angry. Tired. Is anybody else in here ever tired?

We have this need, this urge to do something about it all, but gosh, what is to be done when the problems are so big and the needs so overwhelming?

It’s rather counterintuitive, but Jesus says, “Rest.” When Jesus says, “Rest,” he doesn’t mean “Run away.” He doesn’t mean check out. To rest is not to escape or to disengage. To rest is to

renew, restore, and reinvigorate one's self for the good work. As much as it counts to get out there and be in the arena fighting the good fight, whatever work you are called to do cannot be done well if your soul is not rested.

Whenever you find that you are grouchy and no one around you is doing it right, before you jump in to criticize, pay attention to yourself first, and see if you're tired. If you are tired, rest. It sounds simple, but it can be so hard.

Hear this poem by Martha Postlewaite:

Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.

Another moment I love from *Wonder Woman* is when one of the fighting scenes has just ended. During the fight, Charlie, the sniper, is so overwhelmed by the violence and his own horrific memories of war he can not even shoot his gun. The one job he is supposed to be good at, and he cannot manage to do it when they need him most. After the fighting ends, he says to the crew, "Maybe you'll be better without me." Wonder Woman replies, "But who will sing to us, Charlie?" He breaks out in a huge grin and begins to sing. She doesn't ask him to do more than he is capable of doing or even to bring the gifts he used to have, but just to bring the gifts he has, right now, in this moment.

Beloved of God, you are not asked to solve it all. You are not called upon to fix it nor are you to judge the people who are trying so hard to fix it and failing. You are only called to offer your song. Yours. No one else's.

How do you know what your song is? You listen. You rest. You let the spirit of Jesus guide you, and you never run faster than you can hear. "Move at the pace of guidance," one writer says. I wonder how much might you need to slow down to match the pace of your guidance? Or maybe some of you need to speed up—you know what to do, but you've been dragging your feet.

Beloved, have you truly rested lately? Have you listened deeply? Have you fed your soul? Have you quieted your mind? Have you acknowledged when you are weary? Have you told yourself the truth about when you need rest?

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and 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." Amen.