You received a piece of paper as you came in this morning with two poems and some biographical information from Wendell Berry. I want to begin this sermon with the first of those two poems, a reflection on love. I want to go ahead and say here at the outset that I believe Sabbath, the invitation of Sabbath, the practice of Sabbath, is an act of love, the deep love of the triune God for all God’s children and for God’s creation. It is “the lasting world” that Berry describes.

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Whatever happens
those who have learned
to love one another
have made their way
into the lasting world
and will not leave,
whatever happens.
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Jesus stands before us this day in love, arms outstretched, his invitation ancient, yet ever new. In his voice we sense the love the poet speaks of, the lasting world.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

This is the first part of the invitation. Let us not rush to the rest of it, but linger here for a while, breathing deeply of his presence, the weary weight of our heavy burdens beginning to lighten at his invitation.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

I suppose the first step in hearing this invitation is to recognize it is for you, for me, for all of us. It is to recognize that we are weighed down, to be vulnerable enough to say, “Yes, Lord, I am burdened. I long for rest.”
Walter Brueggemann, in the book for this series, identifies some of those burdens at the time Jesus spoke these words. “In context, this might have referred to the strenuous taxation system of the Roman Empire, for ‘yoke’ often refers to imperial imposition. It may also have referred to the endless requirements of an over-coded religious system that required endless attentiveness…Jesus offers an alternative to both: come to me and rest!”

Come to me, you whose life is defined in proximity to the Roman empire, weighed down by demands to give more and more to the state, so that you have less and less…come to me and rest.

Come to me, you who long to be closer to God and are told to be more in relationship with God you have to do more – more sacrifices, more strict obedience to the law, more attention to the tasks of religion…come to me and rest.

Come to me, you who are over-scheduled, who come to the end of the day exhausted, living your lives by the check-marks on the calendar of things to get done…come to me and rest.

Come to me, you who are restless, always feeling you aren’t good enough, always searching for the thing that will make you happy – if I get that degree, I’ll be happy; if I lose twenty pounds, I’ll be satisfied; if I make six-figures, I’ll be secure; when I retire, I’ll be able to relax…come to me now, and rest.

Come to me, you who are weighed down with fear, who are constantly looking over your shoulder for threats, who barricade your homes and your hearts against infiltration, hunkered down, closed in on yourselves, refusing the openness and vulnerability of love…come to me and rest.

Come to me, you who are overwhelmed – overwhelmed with information, with glowing screens, with the pace of living, with responsibilities; come to me you who look forward to a vacation so you can rest and find no real rest in the day to day…come to me and rest.

Yes, we must hear the invitation first as an invitation for us, individually and communally, to come to him and rest. As the people of the Taize community say about this text, “Christ welcomes us in our vulnerability and does not seem to be afraid of it…” Jesus seems to want us to offer our burdens to God. It is God alone who can receive them.
Brueggemann reminds us that one aspect of our burdened lives is inescapable, something we drink deeply of because we live in this culture. Sabbath, he says, “is an alternative to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend…on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly rest-less, inadequate, unfulfilled, and in constant pursuit of that which may satisfy our desire…we are a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess.”

While I do not agree with all of Brueggemann’s assumptions (for instance, I do believe that capitalism as an economic system at its best helps direct our creativity and energy in ways that benefit everyone), I do believe at its worst it can drive us into a restlessness and insecurity that depletes our souls and makes us less able to love God and neighbor as we are invited to do.

Sabbath is an invitation to come to Christ, to lay down for a period of time the need to produce or create or buy or sell or carry the burden. Abraham Joshua Heschel said about the Sabbath, “The one who wants to enter the holiness of Sabbath must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of humanity. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.”

Heschel writes from a Jewish point of view and a stricter Sabbath observance, but I think it is important to note that the concept of Sabbath does not necessarily mean taking one day out of the week; it is not a new law or yet another burden. It is an invitation to take time and hallow it, to recognize that our burdened lives, our weighed down souls, are in need of regular, real rest. It is only in this rest that we discover afresh that the world was created by and sustained by none other than divine love and grace. We enter, again and again, as the poet says, “the lasting world.”

After we have accepted the invitation to lay down our burdens are we prepared to hear the other half of this invitation. “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 is light.”

Our shoulders do not remain empty after we set our burdens down. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves. A yoke is “a large piece of wood which connects two oxen to each other to plow or tow something.” Christ is offering to be yoked together with us, so that the journey we take is not taken alone, but with Christ; the burden we
bear we do not bear alone, but with Christ. He walks right beside us, as near as two yoked oxen, as near as our next breath. And it is in this yoking that we learn from him. We learn his way as we walk with him, and it is a way that helps us walk in the world in a way that blesses the world, in a way some might describe as easy and light.

As I’ve been preparing this sermon series, my reflections on Sabbath have led me to think about my college Bible professor, the late William Ramsay. Some of you may remember him delivering some lectures and sermons here back in 2005. I remember him because he was the first person I knew who really lifted up the practice of Sabbath observance. He would tell our class of Bible students that he always bathed on Thursday for an extra long time, because he would not bathe on Friday or Saturday. Now, I have to admit that all of us at the time thought this was just strange. He told us they didn’t cook on Saturday, or do yard work, or engage in anything they identified as work. He did not grade papers on the Sabbath and he would not answer the phone unless it was an emergency. All very weird to us, even though we were at that moment studying scripture in which Sabbath plays a significant role.

Any thoughts I had about the strangeness of his practices gives way now to reflection on the kind of person he was. He walked on this earth lightly. He was peaceable. He had a kind of quiet assurance of faith that sustained him through hardship. I believe now much more than I was able to see then that some of what made him the kind of human he was had to be the faithful practice of Sabbath, a weekly relinquishing, a regular recognition that he was not the Creator but a creature, dependent on God for his next breath, a God who, in Christ, was as near as his next breath, yoked to him, walking alongside him.

Brueggemann says that Sabbath helps us live mindfully in a world that can often be mindless. It is an alternative. It is, as he says, a resistance. It can change how we walk, how we relate, how we are in this world in ways that bring the blessing of God to it.

Sabbath as alternative. Sabbath as resistance. Sabbath as mindfulness. Hear the other poem from Wendell Berry:

_I know that I have life_
only insofar as I have love.

_I have no love_
except it come from Thee

_Help me, please, to carry_
this candle against the wind._
Today Christ invites us to Sabbath rest. Let us take up the invitation, in whatever way we can, let us receive the love that only comes from God, and carry this candle against whatever winds assail. In this way, we live in the love that created all that is, whatever happens. Amen.