

WHAT'S YOUR HURRY?

Matthew 11:28-30

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The week after the senior high mission trip I engaged in a conversation with a mom of a high school student. When she is at home, this young woman's hand is magnetically connected to her smart phone, 24/7. On the mission trip, the students have limited access to their phones because of the schedule of the day, and this year - because they were in a small town in Maine - their connectivity wasn't the best when they were on their phones. This student came home and told her mom it was the best week of the year, and - according to the teen herself - a major factor was the fact that she wasn't on her phone. She said, "I came home to over a hundred text messages and I didn't even want to answer them. When I read through them, I realized how many of them seemed silly and petty compared to what I'd experienced on the trip - both the work and the relationships - and I realized I'd been a lot happier being more disconnected." The mission trip, with its change of pace and lifestyle, had helped her slow down, breathe, and be more aware of the world around her.

The author Carl Honore has written extensively about what happens to human beings when they live hurried lives. In his TED talk, he says that we live in a world stuck in fast-forward...a world obsessed with speed, with doing everything faster, with cramming more and more into less and less time. Every moment of the day feels like a race against the clock. We used to read, now we speed read; we used to walk, even leisurely stroll; now we speed walk. We used to date, now we speed date. Even when we're intentionally trying to do the things that are good for us, and intentionally relaxing, we go too far.

Here's a humorous yet true example...Honore saw a sign once on a New York City studio for something called Speed Yoga!

The author himself had a wake-up call. Like many parents of young children, reading to his children before bed was a treasured part of the day. He would look forward to snuggling up with his children and reading to them. Yet he noticed that he was too tired to enjoy those moments. He would try to skip pages, to make the books go faster. One day he found himself at the bookstore just about to purchase the volume called One Minute Bedtime Stories, and then he caught himself. One minute? Is that really all the time I'm going to devote to my children for this nighttime ritual?

We're so marinated in the culture of speed that we almost fail to notice the toll it takes on every aspect of our lives -- on our health, our diet, our work, our relationships, the environment and our community. And sometimes it takes a wake-up call, doesn't it, to alert us to the fact that we're hurrying through our lives, instead of actually living them; that we're living the fast life, instead of the good life. For many people, that wake-up call takes the form of an illness. We experience some form of burnout or eventually the body says, "I can't take it anymore," and throws in the towel. Or maybe a relationship goes up in smoke because we haven't had the time, or the patience, or the tranquility, to be with the other person, to really listen to them.

Young people are particularly susceptible to the stress caused by over-scheduled, over-hurried lives. Colleges and universities have begun to notice a change in the psychological make-up of their incoming freshmen. Some students have engaged in too many extracurricular activities; they are spread too thin. They have lost sight of what they really feel passionate about. In fact, a dean at Harvard has written a letter to incoming freshmen, entitled, "Slow Down: Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less." In this

letter, he encourages students to make meaningful, intentional choices about their involvement in college. He writes this: "Don't ignore your health - physical and emotional...your mind and body will break down if you don't relax, exercise, eat well, and most all, sleep...Give yourself a break sometimes - go to a movie, a play, a rock concert...sit outside and read a novel, go to a place of worship, find a pleasant place off-campus where you can be alone with your thoughts. hang out with your friends, play frisbee, keep up a good dining hall conversation until everyone else has left. It won't hurt, and will probably help, your academic performance." More isn't always better. Faster isn't always healthier or even more productive.

We know that our use of technology contributes to the frenetic pace of our lives. Those of us who watched the Screenagers movie Thursday night were reminded of how it scientifically works in our brains that our devices can become addictive. Studies are beginning to show links between smartphone usage and increased levels of anxiety and depression, poor sleep quality, and increased risk of car injury or death.

We become accustomed to the stimulation that comes from being connected. Social media encourages us to compare ourselves to others - and everyone else always looks like they're having more fun, buying more, doing more than we are.

We want to change our lifestyles, we don't want to be crazy-busy, yet we fear missing out. We have become afraid of blank calendar pages. We may not say we are, but our lives prove it. Parents are afraid their children will fall behind socially, athletically; there's intense pressure to sign up for that one more team, participate in one more camp, hire one more private coach, go to one more tournament. All of a sudden, the whole family is stressed.

One mother writes this: “Recently I was on the way to pick up my children from school. My eye was twitching and I was stressed out of my head. I began to wonder, “Why did I feel so nervous? Why was life so busy? Why could I never just sit down? I feel like my life is on a runaway train.”

That moment was her wake-up call. She realized that there is a difference between having a full life of purpose and being out of control busy. She realized that she had choices, more power over her time and her family’s time than she had previously acknowledged.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

Once again, Jesus gives us an antidote to the anxiousness that is permeating our culture. Jesus gives us a way out of a life of stress and the loneliness which is so pervasive across all generations, a way to help us cope. Here it is again in the Message version of the Bible:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

The way of Jesus is a simpler way, it is a way of life that values freedom. What would it be like to be able to break free of the norms of our society, the message that says that we always must be busy, we always must fill our calendars with more activities, just as we must fill our houses with more stuff? When we are comfortable with who we

are, when we learn to rest in God's presence, we are learning to trust. We learn when to say "yes" and when to say "no," relying on God's guidance. We choose to do the things that bring value to our lives.

The way of Jesus is countercultural. It calls for us to take a critical look at the way we are living and ask hard questions. "Is this lifestyle healthy? Is it good for my relationships? Is it bringing me closer to God - or do I feel more disconnected from my spirit?" Rather than accepting that "this is just the way things are," we are called to realize that we have choices. We can't change everything, but we do not always need to conform.

There is an old religious term, one we don't use a lot any more. The word is "idolatry." Idolatry, according to the Bible, is worshiping anything or anyone other than the one true God. All kinds of things can become idols. Money, power, security, leisure, pleasure. Even good things can become idols. The point is that a life centered on God and on the values God loves will be a healthy, whole, well-balanced life. A life centered on anything else, even on something good, will never be satisfying, because we are meant and created to be in relationship with God.

Over my last three sermons, I have talked about how tempting it is, in our present culture, to fall prey to messages that ultimately lead us towards emptiness, and stress, and loneliness. We are constantly told to believe that money and things will make us happy, that we should fill our lives with noise and distraction, and that busier always means better. These are traps and when we fall down them, we sometimes fall down hard and find it difficult to claw our way back to the light.

A friend of mine went to Costa Rica for her honeymoon. As part of their trip, they took a river-boat nature tour. They set out slowly and quietly down the river, the engine barely running. All there was to see was a giant wall of green on either side. She and

her husband, both twenty-something Americans, used to fast-paced experiences, gave each other a look. They were both thinking, “This is going to be so boring. The animals must be few and far between.” It turned out that wildlife was everywhere; they just had to learn how to look.

The tour guides, who had all sorts of practice with this type of looking, could point out iguanas, birds, crocodiles — all hiding in plain sight. By the end of the trip, everyone started spotting wildlife on their own, in the exact same places that had previously looked like green monoliths.

If they had sped down the river on a powerboat, not only would the noise have scared away all the wildlife, but they never would have had the time to see anything anyway. Only by being quiet and going slow could they appreciate the amazing beauty all around them.

In her book, Wanderlust, Rebecca Solnit says this: “I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.”

We can't control everything. The world is going to cause us stress and anxiety. But we do have choices, and those choices can help us tap into life as it was meant to be and help us cope.

What parts of your life do you want to slow down as summer comes to a close and the busier autumn season begins? Is your worship of a full schedule keeping you from a more vibrant relationship with God? What might begin to grow in your life if you cultivated a slower pace?