The Pause that Really Refreshes
Text: Acts 10:38-42
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Last week I received a phone call from my daughter Rachel, the United Methodist church planter in Virginia. She had been asked to lead a seminar for clergy on how to reach ‘millenials,’ those in the 20-40 age group. She was very annoyed.

The issue wasn’t the request. The issue was the assumptions that dripped from the request. They wanted to know the tricks, the gimmicks, the kind of cool music or dress or smoke machine or whatever that could capture that age group back into the church.

Rachel was clear in her annoyance. Reaching millennials isn’t about smoke and mirrors or clever tactics. What reaches millennials? She kept emphasizing two words: authenticity and service. What attracts millennials is not a gimmick or a tactic or some form of spin. They are attracted to a church by its authenticity; the pastor, the worship, the people. Is the gospel real? Is it genuine, the real deal?

Now ‘real’ can be a noun or an adjective, and sometimes people confuse them. Remember people can be real dumb, confused, wrong. Sincerity by itself is not a virtue, for lots of people are sincerely messed up. Reality is a noun; meat and potato faith, truth that flows from the one who said, “I am the truth” (John 14:6).

I laughed when I heard this. My generation, from the 60’s, also focused on being authentic and serving. The greatest generation from the era of World War 2 did the same. Every generation values authenticity and service. In John 4 Jesus encounters a woman at a well in Samaria in the heat of the day. He had sent his disciples ahead into the village to find a Mickey D’s and lingered by the well. He struck up a conversation with the woman who came to draw water. It got intense so the woman sought to shift the subject to a hot topic of worship.

Jews said Jerusalem was the only real place to worship, while Samaritans said it was in their country. When she asked Jesus the question he drilled home. There are no right answers to wrong questions. “The time is coming, and is here, when stuff like that no longer matters. God is spirit and those who worship him must do so in spirit and in truth. The hunger for authenticity is as old as the Bible and as new as this morning’s headlines.

The same goes for service. Millennials and others are not looking for churches and religion that are all about “me” but a faith that calls us outside ourselves, that makes a difference through us into the lives of others. A religion that brings no change or no good to others isn’t worth the effort. Again, that is not an appeal limited to any one generation, for it speaks to us all.

Keep in mind that real is a noun, not an adjective, and our culture tends to confuse the two. You can be real wrong, real mistaken, real dangerous, real sincere but sincerely wrong. In the Christian faith ‘real’ is about the noun that points to truth, the meat and potatoes of faith that matters and belief that is solid and actions that make a difference. The Kingdom is reality.

That brings us to Mary and Martha. Jesus and the disciples show up unannounced at the home of the sisters and their brother Lazarus. He isn’t a player in this story but later the brother gets sick and dies and Jesus returns and raises him from the dead, so his name will make the papers eventually. He just isn’t in this story.

Martha is running around the kitchen trying to get together food for Jesus and his disciples and notices Mary is not there. She finds Mary in the living room, sitting at Jesus’ feet.
Martha gets understandably upset and hisses at Jesus, “Master, there’s a lot of work to do and I need help. Tell my sister to get with it.” Jesus replies, “Martha, chill. There are few things truly important in life, actually only one and Mary has chosen it. I won’t pull her away.”

Jesus didn’t say that with a saucy attitude or voice but he laid it out, as a gift to us also. It is authenticity. You can’t enter into an authentic faith or gospel without being real. We can be raised to do stuff, organized religion and all the rest, but without a sense of reality about it or a transforming power, why do it. That answer matters.

It is possible to pretend, to go through the motions without thinking about it. Without a reason that makes sense, more folks today, and not just millennials, are saying, “If this doesn’t make sense and make a difference, I am not going to do it.” To that Christ would add, “Amen.”

I have a poster that reads: TRADITION. Underneath is a picture of a guy who is running with the bulls in Pamploma and he is about to get poked in the rear by the horns. The caption reads: Just because it has always been done this way doesn’t mean it isn’t incredibly stupid. Tradition or habit may or may not be what the Boss has in mind. You find the answer to that question at the feet of Jesus.

Authenticity moves us beyond business as usual to revisiting the words of the Boss.

Everyone was right that day. Martha was right; she needed help. Mary was right; she needed time with the Lord. Jesus was right; after all, he’s Jesus. He offers what both needed then and what we need now; authentic faith that flows by the power of the Spirit into service.

The priorities are not either-or. It is both-and. Martha was not slammed. Jesus reminds us it begins with what is real within our hearts. Only when the motivation is clear and aligned with the risen Christ can the service flow. Jesus modeled this and we need his example. So much stuff flows into our lives; good and rightful obligations that help us care for family, health and other legitimate needs. How do we find time for God amid all the stuff?

We can’t do it. We cannot find time. Time must be made. We are called to blow a hole in the schedule that conspires to drown us in administrivia so that we can sit at the feet of Christ. So Jesus in Mark 1 ‘rose in the morning a great while before dawn and went to a lonely place to pray.’ In Mark 6 Jesus tells his followers to ‘come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile,’ for they were coming and going and there was no leisure even to eat…so they went away in a boat to a lonely place by themselves.’ Notice there was no lag in the schedule; it was booked to overflow, yet precisely then Jesus calls them away. We need to know we have God’s permission to step back when the demands of life and the needs of others begin to wash over us and we are tempted to lose the answer to the question of ‘why’ because we are so consumed with trying to figure out answer to questions of ‘how?’

It is not just about religious stuff. I talked a while ago with friends who had been married 28 years and I asked them when was the last time they just went off together. The wife’s face turned to stone and she said, “Never.” Hubby sputtered, “Well, you remember when we got away together for the trip to Atlanta?” She replied coldly, “You mean for the funeral?” “Well, yes, but we did get quality time in the car…” and then he shut up, the first wise thing he said.

It is hard for friends to take time to deepen friendships. It is hard for those who are married to nurture that closeness. It is hard for all of us to nurture the depth of our relationship with God. If we do everything else and miss this, we miss what matters most. So we read and study and pray and worship and connect with each other as the family of Jesus to bring us to Jesus’ feet. From this comes the power to serve.

Remember this is the Jesus who said, “I am among you as one who serves…I have come not to be served but to serve.” We find ourselves becoming more given to service to others as
individuals and a church not out of obligation or guilt. We find ourselves more given to service because we are becoming more like Jesus, and out of that transforming presence we find the vision and power of service flowing naturally from who we are as person and as a church.

Years ago was the soda commercial talking about ‘the pause that refreshes.’ That’s nice but this morning we know there is a pause that really refreshes. It comes from our time focused and intentional on Jesus. It comes from feeding the life of the soul and the trust we have in Christ our redeemer. From this pause, through prayer and the disciplines of grace, we find a strength not our own to do a work not ours but His. This is his call to us, to you and me and to this church. This is the way of reality, of authenticity and of the service that springs with life and compassion from this vision. This is his way, his word and example for you and me, if we will receive it. Amen.