

So given that I can't see any of you to confirm that you're actually going to do this, it's a little bit of a weird request, but I'm just going to trust that you're going along with it. I want you to close your eyes, close your eyes, and take a couple of deep breaths, just slowly in and out. Then, I want you to picture the one place where you are perfectly, completely at peace and calm, relaxed, contented, safe. Let the feeling of that place fill you up and seep into your chest, hold it there at least for a few seconds, how it feels to be in that place that brings you picture perfect contentment.

When I did this myself, sitting at my desk on Thursday, I was actually a bit surprised at the place that popped into my head. And then I realized that in reality, I have a lot of places that make me *happy*, but safe and contented? Perfectly at peace? Those are in more limited number. So when I closed my eyes at my desk, the place I found myself was the swing that hangs from a huge oak tree next to the pond in my grandparents' backyard. My grandparents' backyard is massive, it felt especially so when I was little, with a huge, sloping hill perfect for sledding in the winter, and it rolls down to a fairly large pond, where I learned to row a boat and ice skate. Settled right between one of my grandpa's barns and the pond is this oak tree that from the time I was little always had a large white swing hanging from it. It was the perfect size that my sisters and I could all squeeze onto it together

and gently swing, or sometimes not so gently, but that would frustrate my grandpa and end up knocking us into the tree, so usually it was a slow swing. Every member of my family has sat on that swing. I still remember my grandpa laughing at Felix the first time his toddler self swung on it. That's what I picture, the three of us, swinging from that tree, with my grandpa in front of us, old Cool Whip container that now held fish food, in his hand, scattering said food across the pond. His fields in the distance, the creek of the swing in my ears, and the feel of our feet snagging the ground every now and then to keep us even. Right there...contentment.

We all know that feeling. Some of you might be in your contented place right this very second, taking it in, even as you worship, some of you might have the image so clear in your head that it feels like you're there, some of you might need that feeling so badly that you can't help but long for it more now. But I would imagine that we all know one thing for certain about those places which create contentment, we could be weary exhausted, mind-numbingly done with the world, stressed out beyond belief, mind racing a million miles a minute, but when we're in those places, our *souls* can rest. Our bodies and our minds might be run ragged, but our souls are able to find peace and restoration for the journey ahead, and sometimes, as we all know, that is the biggest step.

It feels like for the last three weeks, Jesus has just been throwing the gauntlet down to anyone who will listen, particularly the disciples. He's been laying down some hard truths, and I'll be honest, I've said it to the Bible study folks before, sometimes you just get a little tired of the fiery, everything is difficult Jesus. Even when he's easing up a bit and talking about the ease of baby step discipleship and cups of water given, sometimes you just want to be like, Jesus, can we please breathe? And today's gospel feels like it's going to go the same direction. Now Jesus is coming for the religious authorities and calling out the hypocrisy of their lives and the judgments that they throw around, and it can start to feel a little heavy, because we all know that we could be called out for the same thing. We proclaim one thing while we're in worship and then we go out into God's world and do the exact opposite. We proclaim love and act in hate. We proclaim grace and mete out judgment. We proclaim forgiveness and we cling to our grudges. And you can feel that tightness building in your chest again of like, God, this is hard...everything we're called to is hard...

The world is hard. Life is hard. Our own heads are hard. Our own emotions are hard. How are we ever going to do this? How are we ever going to keep fighting this fight? How are we ever going to make a difference? How are we going to balance the life we lead and the things we

have to do with the path of discipleship that Jesus calls us to? How can one person do all of this? I have a million things to do and the world requires of me a million more and just ugggggggh. I can barely keep my own head on straight, without confronting the chaos of the world. I can barely keep my own baggage in check, without lugging the world's behind me too.

And then...there's Jesus...“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...you will find rest for your souls.” For a brief moment, Jesus eases off of his fiery push towards discipleship and acknowledges what we all know deep within us, sometimes discipleship is infinitely harder simply by virtue of the amount of baggage and stuff we're dragging along behind us, simply by virtue of the weights that hang on our hearts that we just have no idea how to let go of. Jesus looks at those that he is calling out into the mission field, those that he is calling to help bring the kingdom of God to fruition and he just kind of pauses and is like...look...I know you're exhausted. I know the world is hard. I know your hearts are broken and your minds are racing. Breathe. Take all of those things that are eating you up and tearing you asunder and dragging you beneath the waves of life, and place them here, at my feet, on my shoulders. Let me carry them, because you don't need to. There are some things you just don't have to do, and carrying the heavy burdens of

your hearts alone is one of them. Tie yourself to me and let me carry the heavy load of your life, so that you can turn your hearts towards loving one another, towards creating a world of peace, grace, and mercy. Let me be your place of contentment, so that the world does not seem so daunting, and you can find yourselves able to go out and serve it.

Because that's the thing about all of our lovely baggage that we drag around with us...it keeps us from *living*. It keeps us from serving. It keeps us from loving in all of the ways that God calls us to. Our own baggage and burdens only serve to make discipleship harder, because sometimes that baggage tells us that we aren't good enough to be disciples anyway so why bother, sometimes that baggage tells us God doesn't love us so how can we love anyone else, sometimes that baggage tells us that we just do not have the ability to put in the effort to serve others, sometimes that baggage tells us that it's better to be selfish and greedy and get what we need first before turning around eyes and our hearts to others. Frankly, our baggage will tell us anything it needs to in order to keep us from serving the kingdom of God and our siblings of God. Our baggage will tie us up and tear us down and turn us around so much that we don't know which way of the kingdom is up and that's why Jesus is just like...leave it here. Leave it with me. Lay it

down at my feet and walk into my world lighter, freer, happier. Be at peace, I've got you, so that you can get one another.

That feeling that you get when you're in your contented place? That, Jesus says, is a feeling we should be able to grasp onto every single time that we remind ourselves how deeply and ardently we are loved by God, and I know sometimes that's a hard thing to trust, but it's real and it's true and it never stops being true, no matter how big or small the baggage you're carrying behind you is. Jesus wants all of his disciples, including us, to remember that we don't walk through this life alone, we don't carry all of our stuff alone, and when we remember that and hold it close, it makes it just a little easier to want to go out and serve the kingdom and serve our neighbor and help ease the burdens of others.

Ya know, I've been thinking a lot lately of this cross that we all made together, of all of the broken bits and pieces that make it whole. All of those pieces are parts of our baggage. I know mine are on there, in fact I can tell you right where one is because I recognize my hand writing, and looking at it and knowing that it's surrounded by all of you, that it's made into something new and whole with all of you, it doesn't feel so heavy. Looking at it and knowing that my bits of brokenness help make up a cross that reminds us of how much we loved and cherished by God, it doesn't make

that brokenness feel as hard to carry, it doesn't feel like a burden anymore, it feels like a part of who I am that makes me into the disciple God called me to be, and I can look at it and there's that little wash of peace, like I'm sitting on my Grandpa's swing, because in the shadow of this cross, surrounded by my family of God, I'm made whole again, and called just as I am to try and bring the kingdom in any way I can, big or small.

I think, my fellow beloveds of God, this is one of those sermons where I just keep writing and talking when it simply comes down to this... Our souls need rest. Our souls need our contented places. Our souls need those things because the world needs us. Jesus didn't call us with the caveat that we could get to work once we dealt with all of our junk. Jesus called us knowing full well we've got a cart full o' baggage dragging behind us, and he knew he could handle that for us. Let Jesus take your bags. Let Jesus take your unease and your worry and your fear and your stress. Let Jesus be your swing by a pond. Because the world needs us, the world needs us more than anything, it needs our love and our kindness and our grace and our fierce devotion to justice, and we are our best disciple selves when we're letting Jesus take care of our souls and our burdens. Lay it down, whatever baggage you've got, right here, and take a swing with Jesus, so your contented soul can be ready to serve. **AMEN!!!**