

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 10, 2014**

SERENITY NOW

Matthew 11:28-30

It was good to have a couple weeks away, and it is good to be back with you today. Mary Sue and I had a blessed and mostly relaxing time away. We were able to spend time with family and friends in Michigan, including an overnight visit with Dutch and Debbie Miller at their beautiful new home on Lake Michigan just outside Mackinaw City, Michigan. We were able to help with the move of Mary Sue's mother to an assisted living facility in Ann Arbor, Michigan, near Mary Sue's sister and brother-in-law. We got to enjoy a quiet, restful week at Mary Sue's family's cabin on Lake Michigan in Michigan's upper peninsula, and spent a couple days on beautiful Mackinac Island. The last time we had been "up north" to the cabin was 20 years ago.

If you're familiar with the geography of Michigan, you know that the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan are connected by the 5-mile-long Mackinac Bridge spanning the Straits of Mackinac, where Lake Michigan and Lake Huron meet. You may know that residents of the upper peninsula (the "UP") are known as "Youpers." Less well known is the name Youpers have for people who live downstate, in the lower peninsula, the part of Michigan shaped like a mitten. They call them "trolls." Why? Because they live under the bridge.

I know you didn't come this morning to hear a travelogue, but I want to tell you one more thing related to our time in Michigan. The first Sunday we were away, Mary Sue and I attended worship at a small Mennonite church in the village of Naubinway, about a mile from the cabin. Mary Sue's family attended worship there for many years in summers past. The Sunday we were there, the church happened to be hosting a gathering of the CMA – the Christian Motorcycling Association – from around the area. It was cool to see all of these bikers with their CMA shirts or jackets that said "Riding for the Son."

Last Sunday we worshiped at a congregational church on Mackinac Island known as the "Little Stone Church." It is a beautiful stone church, built a little more than 100 years ago, that sits just a few minutes' walk from the Grand Hotel, Mackinac Island's most famous landmark. The church is located right next to – are you ready for this? – a golf course. I'm not kidding! They had refreshments out on the lawn after the Worship service, in plain view of and in close proximity to the golf course. There were no poles or nets to protect the church building or any persons on the church grounds from being hit by an errant shot, only a few trees here and there. Fortunately, there is no danger of automobiles being hit and damaged by golf balls since automobiles are prohibited on Mackinac Island. No motorized vehicles of any kind are permitted on the island. Bicycles, horses, and horse-drawn carriages, in addition to walking, are the primary means of transportation. Which means there is no need for a parking lot at the Little Stone Church. I don't think that would work here.

Thank you for indulging me. Now, let's look together at God's Word as we read Matthew 11:28-30. First, though, let's pray.

Let us now give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word. These are the words of Jesus as He taught the people in the towns of Galilee (Matthew 11:1).

Those of you who are *Seinfeld* junkies probably recognize the title of today's message from an episode of the old *Seinfeld* TV show from the '90s in which George Costanza's father, Frank, played by Jerry Stiller, repeatedly shouts, "Serenity now! Serenity now!" When George asks him why he is doing it, Frank explains that his doctor gave him a relaxation cassette to listen to. When his blood pressure shoots up, the man on the tape counsels him to say, "Serenity now." Instead of saying it calmly or serenely, he yells it: "Serenity now! Serenity now!"

In all seriousness, I ask you this morning: With the geo-political mess our world is in today, how is it possible to have "serenity now"? The conflict rages between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas. Russia seems poised to invade Ukraine after already seizing Crimea. The civil war in Syria has claimed more than 200,000 lives. The barbaric, cold-hearted, radical Islamists of ISIS are carrying out the systematic decimation of the Christian population of Iraq as they expand the territory under their control, beheading women and children, and crucifying others who refuse to deny their faith in Christ. The astonishing capacity of the human heart for evil is on display throughout the world, and it is frightening. It is not limited to the hotspots I have mentioned. In one way or another, it is everywhere. Violence, slavery, poverty, and corruption abound. Millions of people live constantly in fear for their lives. Here in America, many of our nation's moral and religious foundations are crumbling or under attack, and it feels like a runaway train that continues to pick up speed. How is it possible, in a world like this, in a time like this, to have "serenity now"?

At a more personal level, with all the pressures and stresses of daily life that just seem to come with the territory here in the Washington area – with all the traffic we have to deal with on a daily basis, with the demands of our jobs, with traffic, traffic, and more traffic, with the financial pressures almost all of us face, with the challenge of finding time to nurture our marriages, to invest in our children, to care for our parents, as well as the need to nurture our souls, with the hurried, hectic pace of life – did I mention the traffic? – with all these things and more pressing in on us, how is it possible to have "serenity now"? Is serenity possible when you're always in a rush?

In our culture we see "busyness" as a virtue. We embrace it as a kind of badge of honor, an emblem of importance. Deeply embedded in the American psyche is this belief that the busier you are, the more important and more indispensable you must be. Your value or significance as a person is determined, to a large extent, by how busy you are. So, to demonstrate our worth, we make ourselves as busy as possible. We take on more and more demands in order to live up to our own expectations, or to the expectations of others. At some level, I think, we know that "the gospel of busyness" is a lie. It produces endless frustration and ultimately leads to despair.

You may remember from our church-wide small group study two years ago of John Ortberg's book *The Life You've Always Wanted* the counsel Ortberg received from his mentor, Dallas Willard, about what he needed to do to be and to remain spiritually healthy. Willard said: "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Hurry," he said, "is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day" (quoted in Ortberg, *Soul-Keeping*, 20).

Replace "hurry" with "busyness" and the statement is still true, for both words point to the same reality. Like hurry, busyness, which causes us to be in a constant state of hurry, is the great enemy of spiritual health and wholeness in our day. In his new book *Soul-Keeping*, Ortberg reminds us of what someone observed long ago: If the devil can't make you sin, he will make you busy, because either way your soul will shrivel (*Soul-Keeping*, 59).

Instead of busyness, or perhaps in addition to it, you may be dealing with a different kind of stressor. If you are dealing with chronic pain or a long-term illness, if you or someone you love has received a diagnosis you hoped and prayed would not be the case, if it is a constant struggle to make ends meet, if you are out of work and can't find a job, if there are seemingly unresolvable problems in your marriage or family, if you are burdened with concern for a child or grandchild who is far from God, if you are caring for a parent or other loved one, if loneliness or depression is your constant companion, if you feel worn out or burned out or burdened with a load of cares, if life just feels heavy, how is it possible to have "serenity now?"

What do you think? The answer to the question – the answer to this quest – is found in the words and person of Jesus. Notice what Jesus says in the scripture we read from Matthew 11. He extends an invitation. An open invitation. A gracious invitation. He says: "Come to me. If you are weary and burdened by the ordinary and not-so-ordinary difficulties of life, if life feels unbearably heavy to you, if you are tired of carrying the burden of your sin and guilt, if you are exhausted by your own efforts to satisfy all the demands and requirements of the law – not to mention the expectations or demands of others, or the demands you place on yourself, if you long for peace – for serenity – in your soul, come to me," says Jesus, "I will give you rest" (11:28). He invites us to come to Him with all our burdens and cares because He is "gentle and humble in heart" (11:29).

Jesus will give you "serenity now." Not the kind of serenity you can get from repeatedly saying or shouting a particular mantra. The serenity Jesus gives is much deeper and more real. And this peace, this serenity, this rest Jesus offers is available to anyone. The invitation is open-ended.

But here is the thing: In order to receive the rest Jesus promises, in order to experience true serenity, you and I must respond to Jesus' invitation. We must come to Him. This is true in an eschatological sense in relation to our salvation. In order to be delivered from the burden of our sin and guilt, in order to be at peace with God, in order to have the sure and certain hope of a home in heaven when our life here on earth comes to a close, we must respond to the gospel invitation to come to Jesus, repeating or turning away from our sin, trusting in Jesus and Him alone for our salvation, and living as a follower of Christ from now on. Come to Jesus in trusting faith, and you will find in Him the source of true peace and rest for your soul.

It is true in another sense as well – in a practical, day by day, moment by moment sense. In the midst of your daily life, in order to experience the serenity, the peace and rest Jesus promises, you must intentionally come to Him. You must turn your eyes upon Jesus. You must allow His Word – God’s Word – to nourish your soul. You must, in the words of Dallas Willard, “ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” You must slow down. You must listen for His voice speaking to you. You must be quiet in His presence. You must “be still, and know” that He is God (Psalm 46:10).

A vacation – time away from the usual demands and responsibilities – can give one a better perspective on life. What the Lord impressed on my heart afresh in my time away is the great blessing and the utter necessity of coming to Jesus daily and resting in His presence. Many of us find this difficult because our lives and our souls are so cluttered with all kinds of stuff. Jesus spoke about this in the parable of the sower, seed, and soils in Mark 4:1-20 (cf. Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15). Some soil, Jesus said, is hard. Some is shallow and rocky. Some soil is thorny. And some is good, producing an abundant crop. In explaining the parable, Jesus said that the thorns represent “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other (more) things” (Mark 4:19). Some of us may need to pull some thorns or other weeds that have taken root in the soil of our hearts. Some of us may need to clean out the clutter in our lives that hinders us from coming to Jesus and finding our rest in Him.

“Come to me,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” – in other words, He is not a harsh task-master; He is not a tyrant – “and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy” – it is not ill-fitting or uncomfortable – “and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

A yoke is a heavy harness that is placed over the shoulders of oxen or other beasts of burden. The yoke is attached to a piece of equipment that the animals are to pull. Jesus sets us free from all kinds of yokes and burdens we are not intended to carry. He urges us instead to take His yoke upon us – the yoke of His grace and truth, the yoke of His saving love for us, the yoke of discipleship to Him, the yoke of loving God with our whole being, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and loving one another as Jesus loved us. He urges us, as it says in *The Message*, to “learn the unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:29). I love the sound of that: “the unforced rhythms of grace,” living in personal communion with our great Savior and King.

Do you long for “serenity now”? Real serenity? Come to Jesus. Come to Him again and again and again. Allow Him in quiet moments to minister to your soul. Come to Him. Walk with Him. And you will find rest for your soul.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.