**Rest for the Weary** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Mark 6:3-34; 53-56 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Rachel Held Evans was one of the great theological translators, bridge builders, and preachers of our time. She died tragically of an infection five years ago at the age of 37. If you don’t know her work, check out the Twitter (or X) hashtag *#becauseofRHE* and behold the vast, digital church she planted, with moving testimonies from those who, through her work, were wooed into following Christ, called into ministry, and summoned from despair into an affirmation of life. She is the most influential mainline theologian of her generation, the C. S. Lewis of her time. Ask any seminary admissions officer who their applicants—especially women applicants—have been reading, and you’ll see that the claim is not overstated.

She was armed only with *“a library card and a blog,”* as she once put it. She never pursued a graduate degree or sought credentials from a denomination. Without past seminary training or ecclesial position, she found a voice online. She was more than a pleasant companion on the journey out of fundamentalism. Hers was an intellectual project, and she took on the most daunting of subjects: *how does the church read scripture and live it out well.* Yet she never drew attention to her studiousness, showed no evidence of anxiety about a lack of academic accreditation, and seemed comfortable operating as a journalist.

Evans, however, can’t be understood without paying attention to her hometown of Dayton, Tennessee, the site of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial (which is alluded to in the title of her first book, *Evolving in Monkey Town*). William Jennings Bryan was the lawyer who argued at the trial against the teaching of evolution by John Scopes, and in his honor, locals founded Bryan College—Evans’s alma mater.

Evans’s family, you see, moved to Dayton when she was 14 so that her father could be a teacher and administrator at Bryan. But her household of origin was also full of grace, with a father determined to make space for questions and a mother who told her daughters they could do anything. As a student at Bryan, Evans slowly awakened to an absence of grace in the fundamentalist tradition she’d inherited. And she started asking questions: *If non-Christians can’t be saved, are victims of terrorism just as bound for hell as their murderers? Are there not obvious similarities between arguments used to exclude gay people now and those used for slavery not so long ago?*

Unfortunately, the *grace* Evans met at home and in Jesus didn’t always get ex­pressed in the Christianity around her.

So she left fundamentalism, road-tripped on Sundays to an Episcopal church, and played pied piper to a rapidly growing set of Twitter and Facebook followers.

Evans was driven by *questions,* but she didn’t dissolve into a muddle of uncertainty. She kept asking difficult questions, and mainline Protestantism provided her with some answers. Sacra­ments are good. So is academic study of scripture. So are non-Protestants.

And in a real ecumenical twist, Evans admitted that not everything the fundamentalists handed her was death-dealing. She got from them a love for scripture, a narrative in which she had a place, and a community that knew her and recognized her gifts.

*Yet* similar communities *were*death-dealing for people she came to love, especially LGBTQ people and women with ambitions outside of the domestic sphere. *“I used the word ‘post-modern’ a lot,”* she laconically reported about her heavy doubt phase. And finally, in a phrase she should have trademarked, she insisted that she’s still Christian because the story of Jesus is the one she’s willing to be wrong about.

Let’s consider these things in light of our gospel reading this morning from Mark 6 where (in similar fashion) we see Jesus being a theological translator, bridge-builder, and preacher.

Specifically, note the invitation that Jesus issues to his disciples: *“come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”*

Notice how *insistent* Jesus is about this invitation. First, he says, *“come away,”* then he clarifies that *“away”* means *“to a deserted place.”* And just in case there’s any doubt, he specifies that in this deserted place the disciples will be all by themselves. Finally, (again in case anyone has missed the point), the narrator confirms that *“they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.”*

Got it? *Away. Deserted place.* *Alone*. Sounds lovely, right? Except that it turns out the *crowds* are there waiting for them, because the people recognize Jesus and his disciples and hurry ahead to meet them in the now not-so-deserted place.

You know, the gospels are chock full of miracles, and there are a lot of them right here in the sixth chapter of Mark: *feeding the multitude, walking on water, healing the sick.* Jesus performs wonders upon wonders. And right here, when Jesus’ plans for getting away and being alone are ruined by this needy crowd, is a miracle we often overlook: *Jesus has compassion for them.* I think that’s a miracle, too.

*Compassion.* In the midst of his own exhaustion, he recognizes the weariness of those in the crowd. In his own need for renewal, he recognizes their need for healing. In his own longing for time away with God, he recognizes their longing to connect more deeply with their Creator.

And so, Jesus responds to the enthusiasm of the crowd *not* with exasperation but with compassion. *A miracle indeed.* It takes a certain spiritual *groundedness* to recognize when you need to get away to a deserted place alone for a while. It takes an even *deeper* spiritual groundedness to respond with compassion toward those who mess up your plans for solitude.

Put yourself in the story (especially in light of the avalanche of distressing news this past week). Sometimes *we’re* the ones in the crowd following Jesus around demanding his attention, his healing, his wisdom. We’re the ones reaching out in exhaustion, brokenness, and longing, trying to touch even the fringe of Jesus’ cloak. And Jesus always, *always,* reaches back in love.

And this is the same God, revealed in Jesus, that Rachel Held Evans discovered through her persistent questioning and inquiry and active engagement with her faith—a faith that gave sustenance and hope to countless numbers of the spiritually weary.

For example, in her fine chapter on baptism in *Searching for Sunday*, a book designed around the Western church’s historic sacraments, Evans makes use of William Willimon’s books on baptism, *which seek to free Baptists from anxiety about baptizing infants.* God claims us before we know our own name, and God saves in community through a covenant we can never fully understand, so it’s right to baptize this way, Willimon argues. Evans adds her own twist. Evangelicalism keeps giving the im­pression that God is just for a very narrow range of people: right-thinking and right-behaving white, male, hetero ... In that approach, grace is changed back into judgment. Baptism says something different: grace is bestowed without merit. That’s what makes it grace. Baptism, she writes, is *“an adoption, not an interview.”*

It’s hard to top that for theological punchiness. Then, riffing off her friend Nadia Bolz-Weber, she adds this about baptism: *“The good news is you’re a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don’t get to choose your siblings.”*

In a similar way, Evans’s first best seller, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, describes her yearlong experiment in enacting the biblical commandments as literally as possible. The book could plausibly be read as a long trolling of the simplistic hermeneutic that re­gards every part of the Bible as equal in coherence, truth, and authority. If we read scripture this way, she points out,

*“technically speaking, it is biblical for a woman to be sold by her father (Exodus 21:7), biblical for her to be forced to marry her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28–29), biblical for her to remain silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35), biblical for her to cover her head (1 Corinthians 11:6) and biblical for her to be one of multiple wives” (Exodus 21:10).*

This is one reason Evans’s critics were so outraged: she wrests away a cornerstone dogma, that the Bible can always be trusted. But she gives one back in return: *that Jesus can be trusted, and the Bible [taken seriously] can be loved.*

Evans can’t seem to help returning in her writing to the inherent attractiveness of Christian faith, after having heeded with full seriousness all the reasons to doubt it. It is as if, blessedly, she could not flush the apologetic task out of her system. That may be why uncredentialed, nonordained apologists fill people’s bookshelves: G. K. Chesterton, Anne Lamott, Marilynne Robinson. (John Calvin himself was trained as a lawyer, not a theologian.)

Finally, she describes the Eucharist this way: *“Jesus slips in, through my parted lips.”* Evans’s gospel is non-gnostic and scandalously inclusive:

*“The gospel doesn’t need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, “Welcome! There’s bread and wine. Eat with us and talk.” This isn’t a kingdom for the worthy; it’s a kingdom for the hungry.”*

Evans, you see, has made Jesus’ ongoing invitation through the church plausible, *even beautiful.* If you want a glance at the sort of Christianity that’s coming, look at the digital church that now carries on its work (hashtag *#becauseofRHE)*. Its witness, like that of Evans, is far from over.