

Rev. Junius Dotson, the author of the book *Soul Reset*, which our new sermon series is based on says, near the beginning of the book that “We haven’t done a good enough job in the church of being a safe place for vulnerability and authenticity. We put on our church clothes and paint on our smiles, pretending that we’re all ok as we praise and worship, only to drive away with the same heavy burdens and struggles we walked in with. I believe, (he writes), that until we create churches that allow for more authenticity and transparency-where it’s okay to not be okay-and people can honestly tell their stories, we’ll continue to hear about burnout, stress depression, anxiety, suicides, exhaustion, and breakdowns.”

The first time I read that, it delivered a powerful punch that caught my attention in a meaningful way. As someone who has through the years suffered burnout, stress, depression, anxiety, and exhaustion, I underlined his words, highlighted them, put stars next them, and keep turning back to them. We, the church needs to be a place of authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability so that people can leave church having laid down their heavy burdens and struggles.

Isn’t that what our Scripture this morning is inviting us to do? Hear again these powerful three verses from the Gospel of Matthew: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? 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."

So, let me ask you this morning- are you tired? Worn out? Burnt out? Stressed?

Depressed? Anxious? Overcommitted? Working too much? Are you Exhausted?

Are there heavy burdens that are weighing on you? Are there things that are keeping you up at night with worry? My guess, if we are being fully honest with ourselves is that most of us would answer with a resounding yes and if not now, there are certainly different points in our lives when this rings true. Amen?

Even though this resonates deeply for me and I suspect most if not all of us, it is clear this is not what Jesus wants for our lives. Jesus, who wants to give us rest, who wants to show us the way, and the truth, and the life, wants us to have life and live abundantly. Jesus invites us to come to him and lay our burdens down.

To know real joy. To have wholeness and well-being in our daily living.

So how do we get from here to there? By having a Soul Reset. By starting this New Year off with an intentional shift in our thinking and being that moves us towards the wholeness that is offered by Jesus. A soul reset means going to Jesus every day and finding rest in him. A soul reset means learning the rhythms of grace and how to live freely and lightly.

Now my friends, I wish I could tell you that there is a magical formula to do this. I wish I could tell you there is an easy way to cultivate that kind of spiritual life in which turning to Jesus is second nature and we are no longer weighed down by the things of the world.

But Pastor Dotson wants us to be transparent and vulnerable, so I have to be honest with you and tell you that this sort of spiritual growth takes time, goes slowly, and is often filled with stumbles along the journey. But I will also tell you that the journey toward a deeper, more fulfilling spiritual life is 100% worth the work required.

As a pastor I have the privilege of walking with people as they try and deepen their spiritual lives and their relationship with Jesus. I will often hear people say things like: I don't know how to pray or where to begin. I read the Bible but it is confusing and so I give up after a week or two of trying. Pastor, I want to be closer to Jesus and I try praying, I try reading a devotional but I just don't feel a change or a difference.

I am incredibly familiar with all of those excuses not in relationship to my spiritual wellbeing but very much in relationship to my physical wellbeing.

In the spirit of vulnerability and transparency I want to share a significant piece of my journey and this is my first time sharing it from the pulpit so forgive me if I

stumble a bit. In 2016 I weighed 200 lbs more than I do today. Let me say that one more time. In 2016, I weighted 200 lbs more than I do today. While I was still a beautiful, strong woman at this weight, I knew that I was not living the life I wanted to live or the life I felt God had called me to live. At this higher weight I struggled to play with my kids, I could barely walk up a flight of stairs, and leading worship was physically taxing for me. My friends, I used every excuse you can imagine to justify why I was not making changes. I didn't know where to start or how to begin, I would try something for a week or two and then I would give up, or, if I did not see results fast enough, I would assume it was not working and go back to my old habits.

Having tried a number of other options I prayerfully decided to have bariatric surgery and make my physical health a top priority. Over the last 5 years I have stumbled, had blood, sweat, and tears (OH SO MANY TEARS!), and it has not been easy. There have been steps forward and significant setbacks. But I knew I wanted to get physically healthier and so I have forced myself to develop new habits, go way outside of my comfort zone, and learn a new way of being. And I am still very much on this journey. I still have a lot to learn and further to go to hit all of my goals but step by step, by God's grace I am doing it.

I believe that if we want to go from being overwhelmed, overworked, overstressed, anxious, burnt out, and depressed to living life lightly and freely in Christ, then we have to do something as equally drastic. We need to make space and leave margins in our daily life to intentionally cultivate our spiritual lives. We have to, every day, practice loving God, practice the means of grace, and practice going deep into our souls and closeness with Jesus and many times going deeper in our spiritual journey means doing nothing and simply resting, breathing and being fully present in a moment of quiet solitude.

Cultivating a deep and rich spiritual life came easy for me and I have habits that I have practiced over decades of my life now. Every morning I wake up, listen to Christian instrumental music, read from three different Christian devotionals, read a portion of Scripture and spend time journaling and praying and just sitting in quiet contemplation and meditation. This practice just works for me and it grounds my day, centers my thoughts, and helps me stay closely connected to my Maker. Every week I listen to a preacher preach a sermon just to hear a different voice proclaim God's word. And then, of course, worship is central for me as it is the primary way I connect to the body of Christ and have my fuel tank filled for another week.

Learning to spiritually lean on the everlasting arms of God does not just magically happen, it takes work, it requires making time, it means being intentional about cultivating the practices that work for you to grow deeply in love with God.

One of the foundational pieces of wisdom I got as I started my weight loss journey was that no one could do it for me. I had to be responsible for each step, each bite, each decision. This is true for our spiritual walk as well. I can't grow closer to Jesus for you, you have to take responsibility in growing as a person of faith. I can point you to amazing resources, but you have to make it a priority, carve out the time, and do the work. And of course, there are lots of cuckoo-cuckoo things out there but let me tell you I have also been on the cabbage diet and the grapefruit diet but I persisted until I found what was healthy and right for me.

Just as I can't promise you it will be easy, just as I can't deepen your soul for you, I can tell you one thing-when you are spiritually grounded and healthy, when you are loving your neighbor, praying, practicing the spiritual disciplines, attending worship weekly, and studying Scripture, you will get healthier and healthier and your relationship with Christ will be strengthened and deepened. The impact on your soul will lead you to a place where you know the deep peace of Christ that passes all understanding. It is not a once and done but continually drawing from

these wells of spiritual development will bring you rest and enable you to lay your burdens down, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

As we begin this new year, as we begin this new sermon series it is my prayer that you will seek a soul reset, that no matter how spiritually healthy or unhealthy you are right in this moment, that you will make a commitment to yourself to intentionally carve out space in your day and leave empty margins in your schedule for spiritual practices.

9-As we do that my friends, no matter how empty our cup may be, the grace and power of God, through the Holy Spirit, will fill us up and make us whole. May it be so. Amen.

11-As we do that my friends, we experience the joy divine, the peace that is mine, the everlasting arms of God. May it be so. Amen.