SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Land of Rest* Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There is a story I read a while ago that I would like to share with you this morning. It is a story that Jewish families tell their children to help them understand the fourth commandment. “The Sweetest Sound” is the story of King Ruben, and it goes something like this:

*King Ruben was always asking questions. “Where is the hottest place on earth?”* and that would have been yesterday, here in this Sanctuary.He also asked: *“Where is the place that the snow falls deepest?” One day he asked his advisors, “What is the sweetest melody of all?”*

*His wise men rubbed their chins and searched their books of wisdom, but they could not find the answer.*

*“Why not have a contest to find the sweetest melody?” they suggested. So the king called all the musicians of his kingdom to come to the palace.*

*Early in the morning, they gathered under the king’s window with harps, flutes, violins, horns, bells, drums, banjos, bugles, chimes, cymbals, gongs, triangles, lutes, lyres and trumpets.*

*Their tuning and scraping and testing awoke the king. Smiling, King Ruben jumped up, believing that today he would discover the sweetest melody in the world.*

*Throughout the morning, the king sat on his balcony and listened. By noon, he had listened to all the sounds imaginable that could be made by plucking, tinkling, blowing and banging.*

*By afternoon, the king had heard all the melodies which could be made by whistling, jingling, shaking, sawing, buzzing and pounding. Then the advisors asked their king, “To your ears, which melody is the sweetest?”*

*King Ruben had listened, but he could not tell which sound was the sweetest.*

*One of his advisors suggested that he should have all the instruments play together, at the same time. “A wonderful idea,” said the king.*

*So, all of the instruments rang, bonged, blared, pealed, strummed and whistled together. King Ruben wrinkled his face and listened with all his might. The noise was so great he could not think.*

*Just at that moment, a woman dressed in her Sabbath best pushed to the front of the crowd. It was now late on Friday afternoon. “O King, I have the answer to your question,” she said. The king was surprised because she did not even have an instrument.*

*“Why didn’t you come earlier?” the king asked.*

*The woman replied, “I had to wait until just before the setting of the sun.”*

*Sure enough, the sun was setting in the west. The musicians were still puffing, blowing, chiming and strumming. But again, there was so much noise the king could hardly think. He raised his hand.*

*“Stop!” he said. And all the musicians put down their instruments.*

*Taking two candles and placing them on the balcony railing, the woman lit them. Just as the sun was setting, the flames of the candles glowed.*

*At that moment, she lifted her hands to cover her face, as she lifted her voice and prayed, “Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us by thy commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights.”*

*Then she took her hands away from her face. “He that has ears to hear, let him hear,” she said.*

*The king raised his head; the advisors took their hands away from their ears. The people in the crowd stood still.*

*The king was whispering, “What? What was that?” He could not hear a sound.*

*“What you hear,” said the woman “is the sound of rest. And isn’t it the peace that the Sabbath brings the sweetest melody of all?”*

What the woman in the story did has been done by Jewish families for thousands of years. It is still done all over the world by observant Jewish families. They prepare themselves for the setting of the sun on Friday evening. Once the Sabbath candles are lit, all work stops. The family gathers, and it is time for rest beginning with the Sabbath meal.

The rest they welcome into their lives every Friday evening is rest for the body and the mind. It is a time to let the cares of the week settle on the doorstep. Inside, the family is together and they affirm, together, that just as God rested on the seventh day, God’s people were also to rest themselves.

In fact, the Sabbath observance affirms that rest is a blessing directly from God. In our rest, we also see God’s presence in our lives—God cares for humankind by sanctifying a day of rest.

Jesus was doing the same thing when he invited his disciples and the listening crowds to rest in him. The difference is that the rest Jesus offers was for more than our bodies, it is for our hearts and our spirits. Jesus offers a rest that heals and makes us whole—as individuals, but also as a community.

In Bible Study this past week, both groups acknowledged that the rest Jesus offers is not easy to receive because it not achieved by laying down our troubles. Instead, what Jesus offers is to help us with the burdens we carry. Jesus promises that we will never be alone. He will be with us.

At this point, I would like you to remember the yokes I showed the children a little earlier this morning. As we talked about yokes in Bible Study, I found that the picture I had in my mind of the yoke Jesus offered was different than the rest of the group.

My mind’s picture was of the double yoke like the one you saw. I always thought of Jesus offering to be “in harness” with us. I always saw a yoke he shared with us.

However, some of the others in our Bible Study envisioned Jesus holding the reins, guiding those who had taken on the yoke he offered.

It seems to me that we can affirm both pictures. Jesus *does* share our load. Jesus *does* guide our lives. Both pictures are correct. Both show us the image of Christ that he promised to be throughout the Gospels—both guide and partner in our lives.

As for the yoke being easy…well…

The yoke Jesus offers us is easy in the sense that our reception of **Jesus’ yoke is never going to be something of which we ever need to be ashamed.**

Even if the world around us balks at honesty, compassion, and a commitment to justice, we need never be ashamed when Jesus guides us into those paths of action and commitment. We need never regret the effort we gave when we lifted our voices with the weak who were being abused, with the hungry who were being ignored, or with the ones crying out for justice. We need never look back on our lives with that kind of regret or self-reproach.

When I think of my own heroes and heroines in history, who have accepted the yoke of Christ, this is what I believe I see.

One of those heroes is William Barber. In the Rev. William Barber, the founder of the Poor Peoples’ Movement, I see a man who never doubts the work of calling on the powers that be to make laws more fair, and compose public budgets that will lift people out of poverty. The work is hard and the number of people the movement needs to convince must seem infinite.

And sometimes, he acknowledges, he is not sure that the specific methods he and the movement are using are the right ones. This is what he said about that:

*“Sometimes, we were learning, we had to hold hands and walk forward into the darkness, even when we didn’t know what the next step would bring. Walking by faith wasn’t easy…No one knew just what we were becoming, but one thing we knew for sure: there was no turning back.”*

No turning back to acceptance of injustice.

No turning back to being treated with a lack of compassion and respect.

No turning back to hopelessness.

Onward, instead into the land of rest. This is the land in which our hearts and spirits will always be easy and rested because we have been in partnership with Christ, pulling in the same direction and with the same determination. This is the land where Christ, who holds the reins, is guiding us—a land where we may all find rest and goodness. Most of all, what we are offered is rest that is not just for ourselves, but for the healing of all peoples.

Friends, to receive the yoke of Christ may not be easy, but ultimately, it holds for us a hope and a future of true rest for all people. Christ offers us a restful way of life that brings joy and peace and hope wherein we might be able to say like the woman in the story I began this sermon with:

*“What you hear is the sound of rest. And isn’t the peace that the Sabbath brings the sweetest melody of all?”*

Indeed, it is. Thanks be to God. Amen.