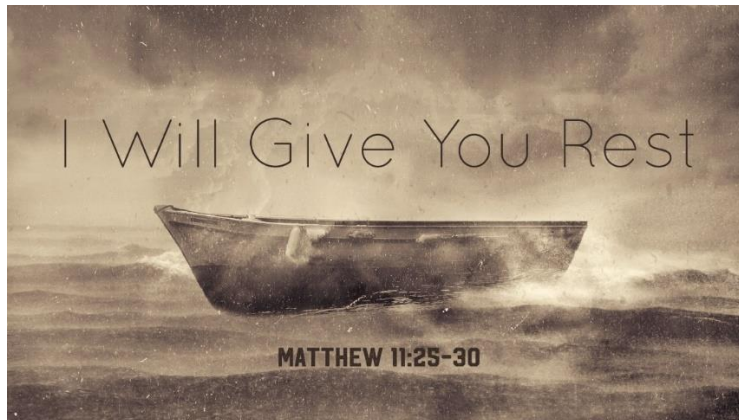


Sermon – July 9, 2023
“My burden is light”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit come. Visit us and fill our open hearts and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning. In case anyone was wondering if summer were going to heat up or if it were going to be cool all summer, I think we have our answer. Welcome to the hot, hazy, humid, and chance-of-thunderstorms days of summer in Virginia. Get out and enjoy the heat while you can. I hope that we are beginning to realize that we have disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church. We are still very much a church in the Wesleyan tradition, and there is more to come as we journey out of the UMC into the future God has planned for our participation in His mission. On Monday of this past week, I received notice from the Global Methodist Church that my application had been unanimously approved and I am now a “to be ordained Elder” in the GMC. While that has a great deal of theological meaning for the life of the churches I serve, in John Wesley’s understanding it means that I “bear authority and responsibility to proclaim God's Word fearlessly, to teach God's people faithfully, to administer the sacraments, and to order the life of the church so that it may be both faithful and fruitful.”ⁱ From a less theological point of view, it also means that as an Elder I can wear a stole and can serve fully where I am led by the

Spirit. The words “to be ordained Elder” means that I have not yet been ordained by the leadership of the GMC but will be once they hold their convening conference in 2024 and stand up a governance structure in Virginia.

As I read this morning’s text this past week, I found myself drawn to the idea that the Son of Man was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Many of us may long to hear Jesus tell us, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” but I think what I would like to hear said about or to me is that I, like Jesus, was a friend to sinners. I think that expression captures what faithful servants of Jesus are to be, friends of sinners, those who will love them as Jesus loves us. I think we are to be known among those living outside the walls of the church building as followers of Jesus who come among those who reject Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and while we do not condone how they live, we extend the love of Jesus to them through personal relationships.

When Jesus speaks about the generation he’s among, he is speaking of those who reject him and he compares them to children who are playing in the marketplace and complaining that the other children there waiting on their parents don’t play as they should. The flute is played but the other children don’t dance. The sounds of wailing are made by children but their playmates don’t join the game with mourning. The children don’t join the other children’s games as they desire. Jesus compares this familiar scene in the marketplace to the way in which John the Baptist and Jesus have been treated by this generation. John came as one who called people to repentance, to come out into the wilderness, to be baptized and seek to live as God required them to live. Jesus by contrast came as one who was among sinners, eating with them, talking with them, having fellowship with them, and revealing the Father. The generation that Jesus is speaking of rejects both John and Jesus. One is too strict and the other breaks the Law by being a friend to sinners. Jesus ends his comments about the generation he is among by pointing out that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

In the Old Testament, wisdom was how one lived a godly life. Jesus’ statement about wisdom points to a new wisdom that will show how he and John have followed God’s direction and are pointing us to a new idea of wisdom. In the New Testament, Jesus becomes the replacement for the Old Testament idea of wisdom. Jesus not only shows us how to live a godly life, but enables us to do so as well. We are enabled through the cross, receiving mercy and grace through Jesus from God and we are empowered by Holy Spirit.

The next section of Matthew, chapter 11:25-30, contains a key verse in Matthew's Gospel. This is a place to underline in our Bibles, noting the key verses here. In these verses, Jesus shares a short prayer to the Father and, in the midst of his prayer, Jesus will call the Lord of heaven and earth his Father. Jesus will also claim that he and his Father have an exclusive relationship, one of knowing each other. Jesus alone knows the Father and the Father alone knows Jesus. Jesus is not "aware of" the Father or "know about" the Father. Instead, Jesus *knows* the Father. Jesus also has been given all things by the Father and reveals the Father to anyone he chooses. The Son reveals the Father. If we come to the Son and Jesus chooses, he will reveal the Father to us.

Don't miss how Jesus starts the next statement after the end of the prayer. He tells his disciples, those listening and those hearing his words today, "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens" and Jesus will give them rest. Jesus is gentle and humble even as one who has all things handed over to him by his Father. Jesus' call is to all who are struggling to live in the world whose burdens are not just the oral Law taught by the scribes or the oppression of Rome. It is a call to those who are seeking to live in the world. Jesus' call is to all who do not follow him, to all who are seeking to carry the burden of trying to live as the world wrongly teaches. As a result, they have heavy burdens from which they can find no rest for their troubled soul. Only in Jesus will our soul find rest.

Jesus tells us to take his yoke. Jesus' yoke is not the yoke of oxen; we are not being yoked to Jesus who will do work in his power as we go with him. The reference is to a human yoke, one that was used by an individual to carry heavy burdens. We are being asked to take up Jesus' yoke and to release the yoke of the world we are currently seeking to carry. For the disciples around Jesus, the yoke they were carrying was the yoke of the Law as it was understood by the scribes and religious leaders of Jerusalem and the yoke of Roman oppression, a yoke they were subject to as an occupied country. Jesus asks us instead to take up his yoke. Jesus's yoke is easy. His yoke is not an escape from righteousness but an enabling to live as Jesus requires, to keep the Law as Jesus fulfills the Law. Jesus reveals the true meaning of the Law, mercy, and grace, and invites us to be our true selves as we take on his yoke. The yoke of the world is a constant seeking through the world's values and standards to find rest for our soul, but this yoke does not give rest to our soul. Instead, it stirs our soul constantly. In the Wesleyan band meetings, the first question asked of each member as they come together to meet is "How is it

with your soul?” The question helps us stop and reflect on the state of our soul. The question helps us look inwardly at our soul to see if we are at peace and moving toward a soul state that is at rest in Jesus or if our soul is stirred and anxious with the cares of the world. We put on Jesus’ yoke by turning to Jesus, accepting him as our Lord and Savior, and then through Jesus’ revelation about God, learning to live as God requires. Such learning does not lead to more of a burden, more laws to keep, but to rest, peace in our soul from the light burden of Jesus as compared to the heavy loads we have tried to carry that weigh us down. In Christ we are freed to love as the Father loves the Son and as the Son loves the Father. We often refer to this learning as discipleship, a lifelong process of learning how to live as God requires those in His kingdom to live. We are seeking to follow Jesus, to learn about him, and, through him, learn what the Father requires of us so that we might become our true selves in Christ. We will also hear discipleship spoken of as something we do with others. When we seek to disciple others, we seek to introduce them to Jesus and help them step onto the path of lifelong discipleship, a life of learning how to live as God requires, learning to set aside the world’s teaching, and growing into the image of Jesus. The world’s teaching is empty, heavy, and wears us down. Jesus’ teaching brings rest for our soul. Jesus’ teaching is not freedom from struggles and difficult times of life but living through them as Jesus teaches us to live, as Jesus welcomes us into the relationship of love he has with his Father.

We might ask ourselves, “What does it mean to disciple others or become a disciple?” A first step is to set aside our desires and ask Jesus to displace the desires of the world that are within us and to replace them with his desires for our lives. The desires we receive from Jesus we are to ask to be developed and nurtured that we might serve Jesus through them. Next, we need to learn who Jesus is. Here we are given God’s Word in our Bible to read, study, learn, and gain insight into who Jesus is and what his life reveals to us about the Father. As we learn, we gain insight into how Jesus reveals to us the love he and the Father share and how we are invited into that loving relationship. We begin to understand what cruciform love looks like through Jesus’ death for us on the cross and we begin to learn what resurrection love looks like as Jesus is raised from the dead. As we learn about Jesus, we begin to learn about and grasp some of the depth of the love Jesus has for us and we begin to have a desire to share that love with others. Our desires begin to be those of Jesus for us to know the love shared between the Father and the

Son and to help others enter that loving relationship through Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit.

There is one last aspect to this morning's text that I think we should catch as it relates to discipleship. Notice that when Matthew writes what Jesus spoke about himself in verse 19 that Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man who is a friend of tax collectors and sinners. What stands out is the addition of tax collectors as being friends of Jesus. Jesus is a friend to sinners, and tax collectors would be included in that category, but Matthew adds in tax collectors as those to whom Jesus is a friend. It is as if Matthew, a tax collector, is saying, "Jesus is a friend even to such a sinner as I, a tax collector." That Jesus was a friend to Matthew spoke to him of the love of Christ for himself as a sinner. Matthew is an outcast from the Hebrew world, yet he realizes Jesus loves him and considers him a friend. Jesus is a friend to sinners, even such a sinner as I am. Jesus calls all of us into friendship with him. Matthew's inclusion of himself as a friend of Jesus gives us a starting point for discipling others. We, like Jesus, are to be friends of tax collectors, those in the world who have rejected Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We are not to avoid them but are to engage them, to be their friends and share with them the love of Jesus that he has shared with us. We are, like Jesus, to be friends of sinners and tax collectors. We have to look to Jesus' example to see how to do this, seeking Jesus' guidance as to where we are to go in this community to be with those who reject Christ, who make us uncomfortable, but with whom we are to be friends. We are not to avoid those in the world but are to seek to be their friends. No one is beyond the reach of Jesus Christ. He is asking all to come to him. All of those who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, to them Jesus will give rest. We are to be the church, the hands, feet, and eyes of Jesus right here, right now. Ask Jesus to guide us with Holy Spirit to those in the world who need a friend like Jesus. Ask Holy Spirit to give us courage to go, strength to not become of the world ourselves, and wisdom to share Jesus' love to those we befriend.

Pray with me: Son of man, friend of tax collectors and sinners, send Holy Spirit to guide us to those in our community whose heavy burdens bring only weariness. Jesus, guide us into friendships with them that we might share your cruciform love and they may find rest in you. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱⁱ Elder definition from GMC