Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost

July 5. 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I have always been a fan of the Sunday comics. My absolute favorite was Calvin and Hobbes, which ran from 1985 to 1995. It told the tales of Calvin, a little boy with an overactive imagination, who made Dennis the Menace look well-behaved. He had a stuffed tiger, Hobbes, who would come to life only around Calvin. Mayhem generally followed.

Calvin and Hobbes created a game called Calvinball. The only strictly kept rule of Calvinball was that it could never be played the same way twice. Sometimes, the goal was to capture the opponent’s flag, but not always. They might keep score, but might not. If they kept the score, it would have no logical consistency to it. Rules were made up as they went along, and any rule a player made had to be accepted by all.

At its heart, Calvinball is chaotic and unpredictable, which makes it confusing and unpleasant for those of us who like rules and guidelines that are consistent, and the sense of order and predictability they give us.

Rules and guidelines come with the added bonus of helping us determine when people are doing something wrong, which allows us to judge each other. We have a lot of that going on right now.

The Pharisees were big fans of the Law, the laws that we read about in Exodus and Leviticus. They spent their days arguing over the details of the Law and how it applied to various aspects of life, and doing countless things to make sure they kept the Law.

They were generally very interested in the letter of the Law and not quite as interested, it seems, in the spirit of the Law. We see this today, in debates about the morality of laws intended to keep people safe, but which come with unintended consequences, or over zero-tolerance policies that don’t allow room for extenuating circumstances.

The Pharisees didn’t approve of John the Baptist, who warned of the need for people to repent. Jesus tells us, “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘he has a demon.’”

Often, they didn’t approve of Jesus, either. “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” they said.

Their problem with Jesus was simple: He didn’t always keep the Law the way they thought he should. He healed on the Sabbath. He spent time with “sinners,” even sharing meals with them, something the Pharisees avoided doing.

The Pharisees didn’t like Jesus’ insistence that mercy and compassion come before strict adherence to the Law.

Laws, rules and guidelines are necessary things, giving order to our lives, but there will always be people who think they should never be broken, and there will always be people who spend more time worrying about whether others are obeying the rules, allowing the rules themselves to become more important than the reason for the rules.

Under this strict adherence to the Law, it became a yoke, a burden, an obligation. It was what they *had to do* to please God.

Jesus wanted them to think differently. He wanted them to think it was something they *got* to do.

When Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” he was offering the possibility of obeying God’s commandments out of gratitude, not obligation, and to join with him to learn how to love and serve God by loving and serving their neighbors.

Yokes are unfamiliar things to most of us today. But Jesus’ audience was far more familiar with them. They knew that yokes were used to team up animals so they could be steered in a particular direction. And, sadly, they were sometimes used on people, used to keep prisoners of war or slaves under control.

Yokes are the sorts of things that, when used wisely, with compassion and responsibility, can be good and positive things. When they’re used irresponsibly, cruelly, they punish and oppress.

So when Jesus says to take up his yoke and learn from him, we are meant to understand that the Law doesn’t need to be a burden, a tool to punish or oppress, to keep people in line. Instead, taking up Jesus’ yoke means learning from him. It means working with him, following where he leads. It means seeing how he demonstrates God’s love for God’s creation, and practicing it ourselves.

Jesus’ yoke is not forced upon us. Instead, he issues an invitation, a call to discipleship, welcoming us into God’s redeeming work of love and grace for all of God’s creation.

When we take up Jesus’ yoke, we find rest for our souls. No longer do we need to worry that we’re not good enough, that we’re beyond God’s powers of redemption. No longer do we need to worry that we haven’t done a good enough job of keeping the commandments. No longer do we need to worry.

And no longer do we need to expend the effort needed to monitor others, judge them on their ability to keep the Law. It’s a whole lot easier on our hearts and souls to love people than to hate, to accept than to judge and condemn.

It doesn’t mean anything goes, it doesn’t mean we ignore people’s sins. It means we don’t exclude or condemn them because of their sins. It means we lead by example, modeling lives of loving service, mindful that what we *do* preaches more than what we *say.*

We are called to live the Great Commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, and being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Not because we have to in order to earn God’s favor, not out of guilt because of our sins, but out of gratitude, in response to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, paying the price for our sins.

Discipleship is how we respond to what God has done for us, without our asking, long before any of us were born. Free from the heavy burden of the law and thinking that we can earn our salvation, we’re free to take up Jesus’ yoke and follow the Good Shepherd where he leads us.

Choosing to take on Jesus’ yoke frees us from the heavy burden that judgment and anger and fear nurture in our hearts, and opens us to loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves.

And there we find rest for our weary, burdened souls.