

**Sermon by Pastor Hanberry at Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD "Take A Rest"
Based on Matthew 11:16-30 July 5, 2020 (Ser20-27)**

I must confess the challenge involved in preaching a sermon on any major national holiday...like Independence Day, July 4, 2020. Usually, we want to see fireworks, cookouts, beach trips, parades, etc. (Hopefully, no parades and large gatherings this 4th of July). And yet our assigned text from the Bible today centers around the concluding verses in Matthew 11: ²⁸ *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

In many ways this text offers what some would prefer on a holiday: An invitation to a time of Sabbath or rest. What more do we need in these chaotic days in which we live but rest and Sabbath? This invitation to Sabbath rest is preceded, however, by a text of judgement, a judgement from Jesus on the Cities in the region North of the Sea of Galilee: Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum.

So, we might ask of this scripture text and of this July the 4th: Which is it? Judgment? Or Rest? Celebration or mourning? You see, it's this sort of confusion that can best be described with this fancy word: How do we deal with the 'Juxtaposition' of July 4th with Matthew 11:16-30? Of course, that's always the challenge in preaching. Indeed, how does the preacher connect the stories or texts from the Bible with our current circumstance?

I can recall in past years the challenge of the juxtaposition of one thing with another—the church and civil society—that collide in a way that causes confusion. Some years ago, I was considering applying for the interim pastor position in another church in Maryland (not too far from here) and as I read and re-read the church profile I was confused about whether they were seeking an interim pastor or a chief for the Fire Company in the community. Sounds rather funny or even strange I would come to such a conclusion, yes?

Turns out that many of the active members of the church were also active in "first responder" careers; firefighters, EMT's, etc. and at the same time volunteers with the local fire company, located just a few 100 yards from the church itself. The mission of the fire company was quite different from the church but those active in both seemed to see the church and the fire company as part of the same organization, part of the same mission in the community. I suppose their missions were the same, in one way: saving lives. One saving lives spiritually; the other saving lives physically.

And remembering Jesus' offer of "rest for our souls" in Matthew, the two organizations (fire dept and church) were in the same work. But there's more

to it than that. Putting out fires and helping people get emergency health care and to the hospital was the end of the work of the fire company...and that's when the work of the church took over. So I suppose on July 4th both groups have something to celebrate.

Then I remember visiting my sister in my hometown, Denmark SC, on the 4th of July. In fact, July 4th was on a Sunday and we went to church at the First Baptist Church, my home church as a child and youth. We sang hymns that one might call more patriotic than religious or Christian and we sang hymns about Jesus' blood and righteousness. We saw images up on the screen of Jesus on the cross and soldiers on the battlefield. By the time the service ended I couldn't tell the difference between the "blood of the lamb" and the blood of patriotic sacrifice on fields of battle. I will be honest, it was not one of my favorite moments in church, on the 4th of July or any other day. Worship should inspire, not confuse.

The thought of those experiences coupled with current conflicts raging within various Christian denominations and churches over politics, hot-button social issues, immigration, racism, responses to Covid - 19, wearing masks, etc. all that alongside of the many ritualized and ceremonial expressions of religion and God within the secular and social society have led me to think a lot about the spiritual focus of our lives and of the purpose and place of the church - this church - in public life. And the text from Matthew this morning helps me explore what it means to be a person of faith in these days. And not only a person of faith but this text helps me to see Jesus, his life and ministry, and his life, death and resurrection as a critique of our current circumstance, or current turmoil and our current challenges as a country and as a people. Politicians so easily invoke the name of God in political speeches. They quote Biblical texts in public speeches and on occasions of historical celebrations.

Some years ago, this issue or debate was referred to as an argument between real religion and something called "civil religion." Civil religion was seen as a "generalized religion of the "American way of life," a religion more focused on the "ceremonial aspects of public life and public expressions of God's divine will and God's work.

Of course, this civil religion is put up against "the religious experiences of people most fully expressed and experienced in their individual houses of faith, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.. Robert Bellah, a Sociologist and scholar, in a book called, The Good Society, describes this civil religion in more specific ways. For instance, he says Civil Religion has these characteristics: ► the invocation of God in political speeches and public monuments; ► the quotation of religious texts on public occasions by political

leaders; ► the use of the lives of these leaders to teach moral ideals; ► the veneration of veterans and casualties of a nation's wars; and ► the founding myths and other national myths are made out to be sacred texts.

President John F. Kennedy, at this Inauguration as our 35th president, said *"finally, whether you are citizens of America or of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we shall ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."*

I love that statement; JFK was calling the country to a kind of repentance. Jesus does the same in Matthew's gospel:

²⁰ Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

Scholars say that every single president at his inauguration calls on the name of God, makes biblical references--especially expressed in Hebrew terms and in the image of the great liberators--especially MOSES. Listen to Robert Bellah again:

It might be countered that the very way in which Kennedy made his references reveals the essentially vestigial place of religion today. He did not refer to any religion in particular. He did not refer to Jesus Christ, or to Moses, or to the Christian church; certainly, he did not refer to the Catholic church. In fact, his only reference was to the concept of God, a word that almost all Americans can accept but that means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign. Is this not just another indication that in America religion is considered vaguely to be a good thing, but that people care so little about it that it has lost any content whatever?

So, what's my problem, you might ask? Once again, we get the experience of faith as I know it and believe it confused with or at least somehow merged with this so-called "civil religion" in ways that we lose the depth of our own walk with Jesus Christ. This can become a substitute for an expression of our own

faith in Christ, and it diverts us from “the primary job of the church, which is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith.”

So, it’s not our work to put out fires or rush to accident scenes. It is our work to help form and inform and inspire people of faith to follow Jesus, live like Christ, and to celebrate this life and death and resurrection. That’s what we are called to do each Sunday, including July the 5th, the day after Independence Day in this country. Amen.