Homily for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. For nearly a decade now, opiate overdose has been the leading cause of death for adults under the age of 45, and the leading cause of preventable death for all American adults. That is a startling statistic. Painkillers are now the primary killers. Citizens of this nation, especially so many young people, are rushing toward the doors of death for the sake of some semblance of relief. This, friends, is a pandemic. And one we aren’t even remotely addressing properly. But it isn’t just the opiates, of course. Now is it? It’s the overconsumption of alcohol, of overprocessed foods. It’s the 24-hour news cycle. It’s TikTok and Instagram and Facebook and the other high-tech dopamine dealers. It’s pornography and a vulgar culture. We crave distraction, diversion, chemical consolation, and respite of all sorts – but respite from what exactly? I don’t know that most of us actually have any idea. What are we running away from? What are we trying so desperately to numb? And what, deep down, what are we really attempting to solve with all this?

You know, there is this cliché. I’m confident you’ve heard of it. Where any younger person speaking to an elder is inevitably told about how much more difficult it was back in the day. An ornery grandfather, for instance, says: “Well, son, you see, in my day we had to walk fifteen miles one way barefoot in the snow evading bears and bobcats and heaven knows what else just to get to school.” Or something of that nature. And obviously, there is some truth in the sentiment, the hyperbole notwithstanding. Things have certainly gotten easier for us Westerners lately, haven’t they? Arguably, a bit too easy. There is the stereotype about us millennials being so coddled and comforted to the point of being downright incompetent, after all. The helicopter parenting, the participation trophies – you’ve heard it all before. But I remember a conversation I once had with my now-sainted Big Momma, my grandmother, many years ago. We were out on the front porch, just passing the time in conversation, about this or that, I do not remember. But seemingly out of nowhere—and this is seared in my memory—she looked at me with an uncharacteristic severity.

And she said straightforwardly and sincerely: “Vincent, I am so grateful to God that I grew up when I did, way back when, years ago. Life may have been harder back then, but really it was a whole lot easier.” I think I now know what she meant by those profound words. We’ve got all the creature comforts of the world at our disposal in 2023. But we aren’t any happier, are we? We aren’t any more fulfilled or relieved than back then. And we aren’t really any less burdened. And maybe that is where the obsession with excess, with drugs and alcohol comes into play, and the other numbing agents and the addiction to insatiable lust and the biased news that only serves to rile us up and the hours of useless video reels and the algorithms manufactured to keep us clicking and whatever other mindless distractions. None of these things actually solve the problem that lies at the heart of a man. And none of these really ease a woman’s burden. The painkillers do not kill the pain for long, friends. After the comedown, the painful burden only intensifies. Dear faithful, we have been looking in all the wrong places. And we continue to do so, particularly as a nation. But as always, the answer is right in front of us, too plain and too simple and too lowly to even recognize. And yet, doesn’t our God always hide the very best of things in the lowliest of places? I mean, our church is literally called Bethlehem. We ought to know better than any.

In our Gospel lesson today, we hear perhaps the most comforting words our dear Lord ever uttered during His time on this earth. “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” After the heavy law of last week’s text, this here is a genuine respite – it is pure Gospel. God created the world in six days and on the seventh day *He* rested. But in a span of time we can only imagine was relatively short, Eve was deceived by the serpent, by Satan in the trees, and Adam tasted of the forbidden fruit along with her. Mankind fell into sin. And every man and woman born after our primordial parents bore the weight of their fall from grace. However, God had a plan. He never fails to have a plan. God is indeed gracious and merciful. He set aside a people. He directed a lineage. He sent a Son. A child born in a nowhere town, the epitome of lowliness, called Bethlehem.

The God Who created and sustains all things, out of a deep and wide love for man and a desire to be with him *and a desire to save him from himself*, God condescended to be birthed by a virgin peasant and made His home in swaddling clothes in a manger. He grew up, like other men. He entered His divine ministry. He taught, healed, forgave, and led. And He was betrayed, was arrested, interrogated, beaten and mocked, nailed to a tortuous tree and then left to die.

The burden for God was heavier than anything, weightier than the universe itself. God’s burden, His yoke was the totality of our sin, every evil thought, intention, and action from the dawn of time until the consummation of the age, it rested on His divine shoulders. Christ’s burden was the death of God at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Then a burdensome rock was rolled against His tomb, and it was thought for good. But on the third day, that pitiful stone was rolled away. Our God, having died, rose again. And what He purchased on Good Friday and secured for all on Easter morning was rest. A new and everlasting Sabbath rest. An easy yoke, a light burden, a gentle and lowly path for all who have grown tired and weary of the weight of sin and death, for all heavy laden with the consequences of suffering and loss and the heartbreaking brevity of this passing life. That rest, that redemption, that respite, it is bound up with a forgiveness won on a cross. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus beckons us to Himself, that we would be rescued from the oppressive heaviness of this life and the cruel denseness of our own darkened hearts. The rest He offers is eternal rest from what we no doubt selfishly wrought and justly deserved – final and unending punishment. But He took all that away – He takes all that away. Washes it away with His blood. It is that simple. In Christ there is peace and relief from the momentary pains of this existence and the promise of never-ending blissful communion with Him and with all the saints who’ve gone before us – and a resurrection in glorified bodies, a new heaven and a new earth, both without end. What Good News to hear this day and every day. How on earth could anything at all ever bother or burden us again in light of this surpassing hope and irresistible promise?

But brothers and sisters, you and I have both heard this text before. We know this reading all too well. And yet, we forget it or we neglect it or we lose faith in it. How do I know that, you may wonder?

Well, because of our many idols, on account of all our vices, our sins and distractions, they tell it all, the whole story. Maybe we aren’t personally victims of fentanyl addiction, but every one of us has his or her own unhealthy distractions and diversions, spiritually fatal methods of desensitizing our sadness and shame. Do we spend even half of the time in the Bible that we do on our smart phones, for example? Do we? I know how often I don’t, and I’m in the business of God. Or maybe for you personally it is petty beauty parlor gossip, what’s socially acceptable but is nevertheless calumny and the demolition of a neighbor’s dignity and reputation, nothing but tearing down rather than building up; or maybe it’s a workaholic mentality that, let’s face it, has more to do with unbridled pride than a wholesome passion; or perhaps it is the wandering eye of a husband or a wife’s compulsion to incessantly criticize; it may be gluttony, vainglory, greed, wrath, the bottle, apathy, or the internet. How much of your day is spent with Christ and how much is wasted with the intrusion of wicked habits and creature comforts that do nothing at all but discomfort your soul? But you’ve read these verses before, haven’t you? Christ’s yoke is easy, is it not? Then why do you run from it? Why do I seek rest and solace elsewhere? What is wrong with us?

Well, dear faithful. St. Paul tells it like it is, as usual. He explains it so well to us this morning. “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing… [because] in my flesh I serve the law of sin.” Now I have the desire to do good – I imagine you do too, beloved. But so often, that isn’t what we do. We fall back into our bondage to sin. The old Adam in us gets the better of us. The devil and the world keep us mesmerized with what stokes our pride and feels pleasurable in the present. And so, we give in. We fail our God and scamper elsewhere, even aimlessly, looking for love and peace and hope and rest in all the wrong places. Because again, friends, we are still amid that baptismal life this side of glory – we are yet soldiers in the Church Militant on earth, currently at war against our lower selves. But you know what, Jesus, He knew all this as He hung in agony at Calvary. He knew we would keep on sinning. He knew we would reject Him by our actions and ugly deeds and that we would constantly turn to worldly things for relief. And despite all that, He remained on the cross unto death. He imbibed and swallowed whole that cup of bitterness and sorrow. He knew He would have to keep on calling us prodigal saints home again and again, beckoning us to return to the safety of His bosom.

And still, He went through with it all for the sake of a deep and wide love – for our sake. And so, our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Mother Hen, continues to gather Her wayward chicks under Her protective wings. We stray and He nonetheless finds us, turns us round, directs us back to His easy yoke, His light burden, the way of forgiveness and salvation and sanctification.

You heard that right, friends: sanctification. What St. Paul conveys this morning is the earthly fate of all sinner-saints. We will keep messing up, we will continue doing what we hate and failing to do for what we love. As I said last week and will say again and will without doubt say many times more, this baptismal life, it is ongoing and continual, repetitive even. It may seem Sisyphean, as it were, and even pointless at times, like nothing ever changes, as if our pet sins always remain our pet sins, the demons and devils on our backs. However, dearest friends, our sanctification, our being made holy, it is not a flat circle. It is not a flat circle but a heavenward spiral. Now maybe that spiral is inching heavenward a bit too slowly for your liking. Maybe you’re even nauseated by the spin of it all and the recurrent returning to the same sins again and again. But the Holy Spirit has got you. He has you. You are being conformed to the image of Christ, whether you see it or not. Trust this. When you bear His easy yoke, you become like Him, however incrementally. It is happening, I promise you. Do not lose heart.

So brothers and sisters: let’s say you’ve messed up once again. Perhaps you’ve forgotten again how easy the yoke of forgiveness is. You’ve very likely sinned many more times than you could count since last we gathered here. But that’s okay. Confess it. Let go of it. Be unburdened of it. Be forgiven. And then come right up here, with me and all these other sinner-saints. Come be strengthened, be sanctified in this here meal. Do you want genuine relief from your pain? Do you want rest from your labors? Do you want freedom from your shame and medicine for your broken heart? Then join me up here at this altar rail. The comforts of this life are so fleeting. And too much of them can end in death, both physical and spiritual. But our Lord’s rest is everlasting. His comfort never ends. And if you don’t believe me now, just on come on up here and taste and see for yourself.

“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” What a joy it is to be a Christian. What reassurance and consolation and solace are found in forgiveness. Therefore, I implore you, dear little flock: Go and tell that to the world out there. This is such good news, far too good to keep it to ourselves. All thanks and praise for this good news, our sole salvation, be unto God, forever and always. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.