Through the written word and the spoken word, God help us to hear your Living Word, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30 “A Friend of Sinners”

I have long been fascinated by cemeteries and particularly by those that are filled with diverse grave markers. These stones tell us a story—one that the deceased or their family wanted us to know. Even markers with only dates tell us a story. They tell us of long full lives as well as lives cut all too short. They tell us about what was happening in the world during the course of a person’s life.

Some grave markers tell a fuller story about the individual.

I remember fondly a grave stone in a small cemetery in Sewanee, TN where I went to undergrad. It simply read “here lies that best darn moonshiner that ever lived.” The reverse of the stone is engraved with a picture of Mr. Garner making moonshine, apparently his lasting legacy.

A gravestone belonging to Sergeant Leonard Matlovich does not bear his name but rather reads, “A Gay Vietnam Veteran.” Below it tells a story: “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men, and a discharge for loving one.” This stone that tells of a man in the Air Force coming out and being discharged from the military is actually nearby in the Congressional Cemetery.

A Utah woman, Katheryn Andrews asked her family to include her fudge recipe on her tombstone. This memorial gained internet fame and the Today show even tried out her recipe. Quite a *sweet* way to be remembered.

If our lives were summed up in a sentence, what would it be? How might our lives be defined by those who love us? Or even by those who dislike us?

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus speaks of the reception both he and John the Baptist received. John did not eat or drink and people said he was filled with a demon. Jesus ate and drank and was called a glutton and drunkard, criticized for the company he kept.

At times I hear this as comical. You really can’t win! No matter what you do, someone will have something negative to say.

Then I think more about this characterization of Jesus. He dined with sinners. Why does that have to be a negative understanding of his ministry? Simplified, sure. But negative, maybe not.

I can imagine a beautiful gravestone reading, “a friend of sinners.”

I love to imagine Jesus eating with his friends, a motely crew to be sure. They wouldn’t have sat at a table as well do. They were reclined, likely on the floor relaxing and eating together. Can you imagine yourself there? Lounged on cushions. Sharing stories. Leisurely eating together in the evening after a day of work. Candle light shines on everyone’s faces. Darkness covers the world beyond the house where you rest.

That was Jesus. Relaxed in the company of sinners. Sharing food and fellowship with imperfect people. What was said originally as a negative characterization is actually deeply good news.

Jesus goes through life with imperfect humans like me. And like you. We are all imperfect people who make mistakes and go astray. And Jesus is along for the whole ride.

Drunkard and glutton are likely inaccurate descriptions of Jesus. “A friend of sinners” is much more accurate AND it’s not nearly the insult that people might think it is.

Jesus is a friend of God’s people, imperfect as they may be. Jesus is a sibling to God’s beautiful children in all their diversity, in all their victories and all their troubles. There is no one too flawed to join Jesus at the table. Thanks be to God!

It is to this same collection of incredibly human folks that Jesus offers his yoke, his way of life.

I like this verse best in the King James Version, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart:

and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Nothing sets my soul at rest quite like knowing that Jesus welcomes me at his table. The person I am, the most authentic and messy me, is welcome with Jesus. Jesus sits alongside me when I am at my best and when that “best” is a far away dream.

Come unto Jesus, all ye that labor for perfection. Come unto Jesus, all ye that are heavy laden and worn down by the weight of the world. Come unto Jesus, all ye who are deeply aware of your beauty and of your flaws.

Come unto Jesus, all ye.

Jesus will give you rest. Jesus invites you to recline and relax, to fellowship, to share stories, to tell of joys and of troubles. Jesus is a friend to all and invites us to share in his life.

Jesus invites us to be yoked to him, to be bound with him in our labors. Jesus is meek and lowly—kind, gentle, humble. Jesus invites our souls to rest.

Breath in that rest, beloveds. Really. Take in a huge deep breath and let it out on a sigh of relief. We are exactly enough for Jesus.

For you who have been told you are too much, keep being you and know that you are exactly enough. For you who have been told you are not enough, you are all that you need to be, and God says you are exactly enough.

Breath in that love. Sigh out and let your soul rest. Jesus is a friend to all. He is a friend to the beautiful you.

Will you do one more thing with me this morning? Turn to page 131 in the Book of Common Prayer. This is right in the middle of Compline, the service of the Daily Office at the close of the day.

One of the scripture selections is this closing line from our gospel today.

Now, flip over a couple pages to 133. And this is one of my favorite prayers.

“Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours

of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and

chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

When we are wearied by the world, we can rest in our eternal God, in God’s son—the friend of sinners, and the Holy Spirit who grants our souls rest.

I have prayed Compline with some motely crews that probably weren’t all that different from Jesus’ own gatherings. These messages of acceptance and rest weave together in my spirituality.

I pray that we can all relax into the company of Jesus and of one another. I pray that we would be deserving of an epitaph reading “friend of all, friend of the imperfected and normal creatures of this world.” I pray that we may share the yoke of Jesus, that we may continue to learn about Jesus and through Jesus. And I pray that in our earthly lives and beyond we will find rest for our souls.

AMEN.