In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love this Sunday’s Prayer of the Day. Each year when the Sixth Sunday of Easter rolls around, we pray this particular prayer, and I am always tickled by it. It seems like such a sensible prayer. Let me read it aloud for you again:

O God, from whom all good things come: Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to think those things which are right, and by your goodness help us to do them; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The prayer offers up a distinction between thinking and doing. We need help with both, and the prayer sensibly requests God’s help for both. It is one thing to think those things which are right. That is a good accomplishment all by itself. But it is even better to do them—do those things that are right. My goal for this sermon is that it will help us along in doing those things that are right.

My opening text is from our Epistle Lesson, from First John Chapter 5. Verse 3 goes this way:

3 For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome... (1 John 5:3, NRSV)

The commandments of God are not burdensome. This is my theme for this sermon. Doing those things that are right is not burdensome. Indeed, doing those things that are right “refreshes our being,” to use a phrase from my great teacher, theologian Robert W. Jenson, of blessed memory. Obeying the commandments of God does not deplete us. The commandments do not make life worse for us, but better. Let’s explore this idea.

At certain stages in our life and in the lives of some of our neighbors, the thought of one more burden in life is almost overwhelming and distressing. One more burden in life would be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. One more burden in life and the poor person thinks to himself, to herself, “Well, you might as well take me out and shoot me!”

There are poor people in our town who faithfully work all day at their jobs, come home with tired muscles and aching backs, who are just barely getting by. They live from paycheck to paycheck, and it feels to them that if
they get one more ounce of financial pressure, everything is going to fall apart on them. And so they worry about their families and about their responsibilities. They do not need more burdens in life.

In fact, in our expensive town, it is not just the poor who are burdened by financial stress. Even professional people who would be financially flourishing in other parts of our land might be close to exhaustion trying to keep their household together in our town.

For some of us and for some of our neighbors, it feels as if the whole house of cards is going to come tumbling down if we must bear one more burden. We might be in a stretch of bad health. That which was easy before is no longer easy. We have to fight with all our might to get done the things that need to be done. And for some of us, it is not so much that our own health is breaking down, but that the health of our parents or loved ones is declining. We are doing what we can to help them along, but life was already complex. So we do what we can. Love compels us. But the thought of one more burden in life feels like too much.

Again, for some of us and for some of our neighbors, we feel that we are in over our heads in our work. That has been one of the surprising discoveries for me at the Pastor’s Booth. New Yorkers, you know, walk with the kind of bravado and sense of confidence that they can handle things. But sometimes people sit down at my Pastor’s Booth and what they really want is help for them on their jobs. Perhaps their boss is really demanding. Maybe colleagues undermine them. Or maybe they simply wonder whether they are talented enough for the responsibilities they bear. And so they ask for my prayers, which I gladly give. They do not need more stress in life. They do not need another burden.

And so we return to our text’s great declaration: the commandments of God are not burdensome. If we are already weary, our text bids us to have no fear that obeying the commandments of God will make us even more weary. Indeed, St. John’s conviction here about the commandments of God not being burdensome could well put us in mind of the beautiful saying of Jesus about his yoke:

28Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

There is such an encouraging tone to this. The manner of life of our Lord Jesus, and his holy commandments, might at first glance seem burdensome, in a world in which we can hardly bear one more burden. But Jesus teaches us
that coming to him and bearing his yoke will not exhaust us but, wonderfully, give us rest. And my! Some people in our town could sure use some rest!

It seems to me that there are two aspects to this idea that the commandments of God are not burdensome. We could discover this idea to be true in the hereafter, and we could discover it to be true here and now. Let’s discuss both perspectives. First, the hereafter.

When it comes to heaven, let us simply take Jesus at his word. There will come a time when we will see that obeying the commandments of God was not burdensome. In heaven we will look back on our lives and see that we were running at our absolute best when we were obeying the commandments of God. Anything else, any disobedience to Jesus and his ways, actually knocked us off stride and made it hard for us to make progress in life. In heaven, we will not regret a moment of our lives when we were trying to obey the commandments of God. There might be many things we regret as we look back on life, but we will not regret those times when we were doing the best we could to follow Jesus and his ways.

When I was a boy, savings accounts at the local bank were rather a big deal for me. As I remember it, the local bank would give a pretty good rate of interest on savings. I didn’t have much money to put into savings, but I put nearly all I had there— all I earned from picking blackberries, huckleberries, strawberries, tomatoes and peppers. All I earned from mowing all those lawns. All I earned from my summer jobs working in the chicken factory. I put my earnings in my savings account, except for my tithe to the church, and I took real satisfaction in the growth of my savings. I was good at math. I could calculate what the rate of interest would earn for me. It was all really satisfying to invest in my savings account.

Even more satisfying should we think it to be to invest in the commandments of God. If ever there were a sure pay off, this is it! Obeying the commandments of God is not burdensome, but rather gives us rest. In the hereafter we shall see, without fail, that we did well to obey the commandments of God.

And for some of us, I bet many of us, we do not have to wait for heaven to give the good testimony that obeying the commandments of God did not burden us. Already, looking back over our lives, we can make the good judgment that we were at our best when we were practicing the love the commandments ask of us. Already, we do not regret those commandments. So, let us explore this idea that the commandments of God are not burdensome— not only in the hereafter but also in the here and now.

An easy first observation: Disobeying the commandments of God can get us into trouble with the law, and that is no fun. Being on the run from the law, for theft, for abuse, for murder... well, that was a bad investment. When disobeying the commandments of God reaches the level of criminal activity,
then we shall find that it is not the obeying of God's commandments but the disobeying that is the true burden in life.

A second easy observation: Obeying the commandments of God is not burdensome in our marriages and family life. Being married ought not to be hard! Marriage need not drift on toward divorce. Generations and centuries of humanity have enjoyed marriage to old age. Obeying the commandments of God helps with this, because as St. John teaches us, the commandments of God are about love. Living godly lives nourishes our love for one another. It is not the obeying of God's holy law that is burdensome, but rather the neglect of that law in our treatment of one another. The neglect of the commandments is the trouble—is the weight in life.

As I turn toward the end of this sermon, let me try to deal with an observation about the commandments of God which might not seem obvious at first, but which I believe is absolutely true nonetheless. My idea goes this way: Even if we break no laws, and even if we have the respect of the world, and even if we are as rich as Midas, but have not love, then we are more poor then we need to be. Greed is no replacement for love. Riches will not replace a pious life. Being able to put your head down on the pillow at the end of the day, thinking to yourself that you have tried to walk with Jesus that day and you are willing to entrust yourself to him, well, that is a great thing! That manner of life is not burdensome. Obeying those commandments might mean that you forfeit some shady financial gain, you might forgo some tempting sexual escapade, you might surrender some chance for revenge, but all those things are the true burdens in life. The yoke and the ways of Jesus are not the burdens of life. It is hardheartedness and disobedience to God’s holy commandments that are the true weight in life both now and in the hereafter.

I suppose a critic of Jesus could scoff at him and his ways and say to Jesus, “Look at what your manner of life brought you. You are a poor man with nowhere to lay your head, with friends who disappointed you, and dead as a doornail at age thirty-three. Surely your ways and your commandments were burdensome to you and impoverished you!” To such a charge, Jesus does not even flinch. In the night in which he was betrayed, as we read in this Sunday’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus, with clear eye, invites his disciples into his manner of life. And so we read these words from John 15:

12This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. (John 15:12 -13, NRSV)

Then Jesus goes out and lays down his life, loving to the very end, and regretting not a thing. Let it be so with us too, that we not only think those things that are right but also do them, following the example of our Lord and
Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen