

Sabbath for Healing

Isaiah 58: 9b-14 Luke 13: 10-17

A parishioner called up his pastor in a very angry state one morning. "Pastor," he said, "I tried to get you yesterday, but you weren't in."

"It was my day off," the pastor replied.

"Day off?" the parishioner stormed. "The Devil never has a day off."

"Well, if I didn't have a day off," the pastor replied, "I'd be just like him!"

Our society holds **activity** in high regard. On the other hand, it's quite indifferent, and even rather negative, toward the idea of **inactivity**. I'm sure you've noticed that everyone is busy, and busy people are highly valued. Busy people are getting things done. They're being productive. They're being responsible. They're accomplishing things. We don't need to ask if they're doing anything important, worthwhile, effective, or meaningful. It doesn't matter, does it? They're busy! That's what's important! Don't be so judgmental! You should be too busy to be judgmental!

Take a look around you if you're in a waiting room, in a theater, on a bus, in the ER, wherever. Everyone is very busy in their passive, waiting state. They're all staring at their little smart phone screens, gliding their fingers as they scroll through their notifications, their Facebook updates, their email, their Instagram pics, their text messages, their whatever it is that their magical hypnotizing device offers. Who needs magazines in a waiting room if you've got your phone with you? For some reason, when people were reading print material, their faces didn't have that open-mouthed, unblinking, glazed-eyes look. Cell phones seem to produce a true zombie stare. Regardless, these people are actively engaged with their lives and the lives of those in their friendship circles. And there isn't a moment to be missed! We're very busy now!

This week, what figures prominently in both scripture passages is the subject of Sabbath, a sacred time and space for inactivity, for rest and reflection before God. Sabbath is more than doing little, but has the power to connect to God's purposes and be transformational.

The reading from Isaiah is from what many scholars would call Third Isaiah, a writing of an "Isaiah school" that occurs after God's people have returned from Babylonian exile and have been re-settled in the Promised Land for about ten years or so. Everything was supposed to be wonderful as the exiles returned to the Promised Land. However, Jerusalem was *still* a wreck vene ten years later, and things were not improving. By the time of the writing of Third Isaiah, many people had come to believe that they'd been forsaken anew, only now in a different place, their homeland.

What must they do to find the new life promise once again? That's the question to which Third Isaiah seeks to provide a meaningful answer.

Our selection is preceded by one of a similar nature that concerns a proper fast. Isaiah describes how their fasting is meaningless and produces no spiritual awakening because their

society is sinfully burdened by the bonds of injustice and the yoke of oppression for the people. We'll hear the same kind of thing again in our selection.

Today's reading begins with a couple if/then statements describing what must be done to gain what kind of result. *If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger, and malicious talk, if you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your night will be like the noonday.*

The first "if" clause should be taken together. In other words, it is not simply judgmental finger-pointing or gossipy malicious talk as separate items that individuals may be doing. All three belong together – oppression, harsh judgment, and mean-spirited talk. These are all likely focused on the oppressed, the poor and struggling fellow citizens who hope to survive while their masters grow wealthy. The ruling elites have been having their way and taking every advantage. They've created a toxic atmosphere of hostility that has fractured relationships and set one against the other. Of course, this is not how God's Kingdom is supposed to be organized, and it is not how God's promise for his people will ever be realized.

Fix these items - *the yoke of oppression, the pointing finger, and malicious talk* – and *then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your night will be like the noonday.* The struggles of God's people are of their own doing. For a healthy, peaceful, and thriving society, you must confront your failure to be faithful over God's abundance, a failure marked by sinful greed and oppression.

Do these things and a generous list of benefits will accrue to God's people. This means for all of God's people, not simply the wealthy elites; for the entire society, not simply a select few who get to dominate and exploit without consequence.

The refrain of if/then clauses begins anew. The focus now is on the Sabbath. *If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath, and from doing as you please on my holy day; if you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath, and from doing as you please on my holy day, then*

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Keeping the Sabbath as holy was a major focus of the Torah-Law and the practice of an observant Jew. The idea of a Sabbath day, a day of rest, a day set apart from all other days, much as God rested on the seventh day from the work of creation indicates how revered the Sabbath should be to the faithful – it follows the pattern of God, the Creator. On the Sabbath all work, all labors, are to cease as the day is dedicated in devotion to God in imitation of creation, with an act of re-creation.

Just as those in the waiting room are dedicated to their phones, so the faithful are supposed to be dedicated to God on the Sabbath with equally steady devotion.

But why is the Sabbath so important here? What will proper observance of the Sabbath achieve?

One can imagine the elites wondering why on earth they should have no productivity for whole day, no workers working, no money-making, a day that is a loss for them. They certainly don't believe that their workers should have that time to be idle. Those stupid oafs would simply get into trouble.

The practice of the Sabbath is about the relationship of the people with their God. It is a practice that indicates the importance of the relationship with God, that God is worthy of such devotion and the relationship has particular value.

It should also be recognized that the Sabbath provides a respite from activity, from busyness, from labors, from consumption, and from the worldly rhythm that drives every other day. The Sabbath is a sacred space apart that allows thought, reflection, and re-orientation to the better ways and practices of one's life. But most importantly, it's time to savor one's relationship with God, and be attentive to what God is all about in your life *and* in your community.

How does being attentive to what God is all about have anything to do with removing the yoke of oppression and the injustice of exploitation?

In the practice of Sabbath, God is set as the priority above everything else. God becomes the focus of attention and sets the boundaries for what is and is not to be done. The practice of Sabbath is the practice of the presence of God and the observance of the will of God. The Sabbath asserts God's sovereignty and establishes God's Kingdom within the worldly environment. That is, it establishes God's Kingdom and sovereignty *if Sabbath is practiced appropriately*, as Isaiah described.

Our reading from Luke seems harmless, a generous story of healing a crippled woman. The woman is special for what she didn't do. She simply went to synagogue one Sabbath morning and was sitting in the "pew." During the service, Jesus was teaching and noticed her. He calls her forward.

Jesus says nothing about the woman, as if she might be deserving, or somehow special, or faithful, or righteous. Nothing. He simply says, *Woman, you are set free from your infirmity*. Why? Why her? Why then? We have no answer. He puts his hands on her and she straightens up, having been healed.

This generous act – the **right** thing to do, right? – is called out by the synagogue ruler as the **wrong** thing to do. Jesus' act of laying his hands upon her is the performance of labor or work on the Sabbath. That's forbidden, violating the sacred time of the Sabbath and contrary to God's rules in the Torah.

The synagogue ruler says to Jesus, in effect, if you want to heal, you should do it on one of the other six days. Come back tomorrow and heal her. I'd imagine there was a lot of grumbling in agreement from the privileged elites who only care about keeping the *status quo*.

This entirely corrupts the whole notion of the Sabbath as a sacred time of devotion, renewal, and yes, healing under faithful observance of God's way. The synagogue ruler is convinced that taking every-thing literally and being strict and scrupulous in observing the Torah is a virtue, a recipe for blessing.

Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites, an expression that people always find endearing. These same people, Jesus insists, would easily break Sabbath in order to care for a valued animal. How can you deny a daughter of Abraham when you would break the Sabbath for a farm animal? How can you see the **right** thing get done and then say it's the **wrong** thing?

Jesus tells the synagogue ruler and his supporters that they've missed the whole point of the Sabbath. Implicitly, Jesus is saying that the Sabbath is the perfect time for a healing to be done. Sabbath is for healing, for healing our relationship with God, for healing the broken relationship between ourselves and the world we live in. Sabbath is a time for sacred reflection, for repairing our worldly lives with what is spiritual. Sabbath acknowledges the sovereignty of God, and the supremacy of the Kingdom. It's sacred time and space for considering the Kingdom, its values, and its claims upon you.

God and his Kingdom are all about healing and new life, and the Sabbath is a representation of the Kingdom and its way. A healing on the Sabbath – perfect! A rejection of evil – appropriate! A transformation of oppression with liberation and new life – that's the gospel!

An editorial note says that the opponents of Jesus were humiliated. Indeed, one would kind of expect that these complainer folks in the synagogue didn't think too much of Jesus to begin with. These particular folks leapt to find fault with Jesus for his act of healing. The same note claims that all the rest of the people were delighted with what he was doing.

We don't know if they were delighted that Jesus was healing the sick, or delighted because he broke the Sabbath, or delighted because he stood his ground with the synagogue rulers and elites, and made them look bad.

Jesus' faithful witness to the Kingdom certainly challenged the traditions and traditional people of his day all the time, just as on this occasion of the Sabbath. Jesus wants to make sure that his disciples understand the transformational power of genuine spirituality. As in Isaiah, who relates several spiritual practices, like fasting and keeping the Sabbath holy, the idea is cooperate in the power of God who would bring you blessings, prosperity, and peace if God's people would seek out God in meaningful, respectful, and devoted relationship.

We're encouraged to let the Sabbath create for each of us a new space, a sacred space of healing, hope, and new life. May our spirits welcome time with the Lord to listen, reflect, and find healing for our driven spirits.