

Not a One Day Sabbath

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

The most famous poor foundation in the world is the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. The tower began to sink after construction started on the third floor in 1178.

Scientists travel yearly to measure the building's slow descent. They reported that the 180-foot tower moves about one-twentieth of an inch a year. The tower threatens to fall onto the nearby *ristorante*, where scientists now gather to discuss their findings. Quite significantly, the word "pisa" means "marshy land," which gives some clue as to why the tower began to lean even before it was completed. Also, the foundation for the 180 foot tower is only 10 feet deep!

Its construction took 199 years, having stopped for 100 years due to continual warfare with neighboring city-states. While the wars were waged, the soil beneath the short tower settled and allowed construction to resume. Apparently, no one thought of adding to the foundation, however. Instead, to compensate for the tilt, the engineers built upper floors with one side taller than the other. Because of this, the tower is curved.

Then another war with Genoa stopped construction and 35 years later, the seventh story was completed. Fifty years later, the bell tower was added – the whole purpose of the free-standing structure near the Cathedral of Pisa.

Amazingly, the tower has not been affected by at least four strong earthquakes. Scientists calculate that the soft ground below the structure absorbs quake vibrations.

In May 2008, after the removal of another 70 metric tons of earth, engineers announced that the Tower had been stabilized such that it had stopped moving for the first time in its history. They claim it should be stable for at least 200 years. All because of a poor foundation!

If you don't get the foundation right, then it should be no surprise that the rest of the structure is going to be one hot mess. Whatever you expect to build won't have the support to sustain what comes later. The end product is unlikely to become a tourist attraction, but it will attract the comments of friends, neighbors, and family, and those comments can be quite unkind.

But what happens in the odd scenario when they get flipped around so that the foundation comes after the structure. As you think about how that would look, you know quickly that the result is going to be an even worse mess. Try adding the foundation like it was an afterthought and you'll probably wreck everything that you built previously and the whole effort will fail.

Both scripture passages call attention to the subject of Sabbath, a sacred time and space for relative inactivity, for rest and reflection before God. Sabbath is more than doing no labor if you're a Jew, or going to church if you're a Christian. Sabbath is supposed to be a time of connecting or re-connecting with God and God's will. Sadly, it gets seen as a thing all in itself, and our scriptures have something to say about that.

The reading from Isaiah is from what many scholars would call Third Isaiah, a writing of an "Isaiah school." Third Isaiah (chs. 56-66) occurs after God's people have returned from

Babylonian exile and have been re-settled in their homeland, the Promised Land, for about ten years or so. Jerusalem is *still* a wreck even ten years later, and things were not improving. Had they been forsaken by their God once again, only now in 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 in Isaiah begins with a couple if/then statements describing what must be done to gain what kind of result. It seems to be setting the foundation, the priority, for what follows. *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 expressions of the "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 others 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 faithful are of their own doing. For a healthy, peaceful, 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 **then** 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 for 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 call the Sabbath a delight, and the Lord's holy day honorable ... then*

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 God's activity of creation, with an act of re-creation by God's people.

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

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. 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. Notice how the if/the clauses are structured. The first things mentioned, the priority items, have to do with establishing justice and equity, not the Sabbath. The Sabbath comes second, but it seems clear that the Sabbath is corrupted as well. The Sabbath has been corrupted because the whole rest of the week is corrupted by the sinfulness of demeaning oppression, poverty, and injustice. The foundation of the society is how it conducts itself. Done with justice, equity, and peace that seeks the well-being of all, then the foundation has been set for a Sabbath which reveres God and cherishes doing God's will – a meaningful Sabbath as opposed to a corrupt Sabbath.

Jesus come around to the same theme. 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. Too many questions ruin a good story; leave it alone. Jesus 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 a lot of nodding mumbling agreement from the privileged elites who only care about keeping the *status quo*.

Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites, an expression that people always find endearing. These same people, Jesus insists, would 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 spiritual blessing.

The synagogue ruler had his priorities messed up. He had made the Sabbath day the priority **above** addressing the other six days. He even says to the audience about what Jesus did: *There are six days for work. So, come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.*

The Sabbath can only reflect the Kingdom if the other six days of the week were dedicated to living in the Kingdom way of seeking justice, equity, and peace for all. If we haven't done that, then any Sabbath observance is simply abused and corrupted by our insincerity. We know that observing the Sabbath is so much easier than dealing with the suffering in the world, and God knows our hearts and spirits when we take that easy and bogus path.

When spirituality is de-coupled from worldly experience, unhooked from the Kingdom and its way, then it becomes disconnected from its intent. It becomes the structure, but without the foundation. A people that values the Sabbath but remains indifferent to the oppression, injustice, and suffering around it is saying, in fact, that it doesn't value the Sabbath, it doesn't value its relationship with God or God's way. It believes that the foundation can be overlaid on the structure of our unchanged lives. However, it topples and collapses.

As with Isaiah, Jesus teaches that our devotions and spirituality must recognize what God is seeking, and that God does not want the mere observance of a day, or a daily prayer, or your regular fasting. God wants more than token spirituality; God wants repentance, reconciliation, healing, justice, and peace for all. When you've worked for that, then you can understand the Sabbath because your heart and your spirit will be right with God.

May our spirits welcome time with the Lord to listen, reflect, and find healing for our driven spirits, but only *after* we have listened, reflected, and sought healing for the least among us who struggle through each day. The Sabbath sets priorities. Those must be God's priorities, not ours.