

The message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on August twenty-fifth, the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen.

Isaiah 58

1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

13 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

14 then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Luke 13:10-17

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

15 But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"

16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Our Bible stories for today seem to hold two messages: One about Sabbath and one about how we get on in our communities. Now it would seem that any good preacher would need to choose one message or the other for a brief Presbyterian sermon.

The problem is the stories insist that one cannot be preached without the other.

And so here we go on our teeter-totter:

Sabbath and Community;

Sabbath and Community;

Sabbath and Community.

In the Isaiah story the people are baffled
and I think maybe God's a little baffled too:

Why would somebody go to the trouble of showing up for worship?
but then hold back their offering for the hungry?

Why would they bother to fast and pray
and then bicker with their brother
or strike their wife
or gossip with the guy down the street?

Why would anyone praise God's power one moment and then whine the next because a woman was healed?

Why, when offered 52 free days of rest a year,
would we say "no thanks" I think I'll just keep stirring up the chaos of American expectations.

Why given all that we know about God's compassion, about God's generosity,
why do we still insist that we better put ourselves first or we'll never have enough?

Why indeed?

It seems that the people in Isaiah's day had a complete disconnect from their one hour a week of worship
and their other 167 hours a week.

They didn't see any relationship between their fasting from food on festival days
and their insatiable appetite for their own desires all the rest of the time.
It never occurred to them that if they would just set aside the length of one news cycle a week
and bask in the glory of gratitude,
live in the light of thanksgiving,
pause in the presence of love
that their souls would find a space for healing
and their communities would be made whole.

In Isaiah's community,
in Jesus' community,
in our communities,
we don't seem to quite get that there is a direct correlation between Sabbath keeping and civic
health;
Let me say that again:
We don't seem to get that there is a direct correlation between Sabbath keeping and civic health;
between our rest and community wellness;
between lightening up on our judgments of others
and living in God's light;
frankly, we don't seem to get that there is a correlation between loving God and loving our
neighbors.

Walter Bruggemann says this Isaiah passage is really pretty simple. It is about neighborliness.
*"The God of Judaism is not a God who likes to be flattered in a more or less passive routine of
worship;
this God is out working the neighborhood and wants all adherents doing the same"* (189).

Working the neighborhood...
One thing I have done pretty poorly in Tontogany is "workin' the neighborhood".
No bigger than this town is,
I should know every name of every person in every household.
But I don't know them,
because I haven't worked the neighborhood.
By workin' the neighborhood,
I don't just mean knocking on doors,
and inviting people to church, though that is a start.
I mean loving the people enough to find out
whose hungry
and who's lonely
and who's scared
and who's addicted
and whose brother is in prison
and whose sister is being abused,

and whose wife is dying,
even if, especially if they never show up for worship.

Sometimes I get a little overwhelmed with the definition of neighborhood.
It seems pretty large these days and pretty troubled.
I can't deny that Mexico is as much my neighbor as Canada;
or that people who live in their cars in Wal-Mart parking lots are as much my neighbor as the
family building the new house right behind me.
The stream of youth in our court rooms
and the stream of youth at a football game
are both my neighbors.

It seems that in the prophet story
and in the gospel story,
the problem is not a lack of understanding that I have neighbors,
but that we have laid such heavy yokes of laws and judgments and norms on them and on
ourselves
that when Jesus shows up and sets them free,
all we can do is say,
"Wait a minute! You're disturbing our worship!"
I read this week from a Christian writer
"Christians do not practice Sabbath".
He stated it, and then moved on in his article.
It was like "O well. We don't practice Sabbath."
If that's true and if Isaiah is true and if Jesus is true then our communities are in a heap of
trouble.

Maybe part of the trouble is our language.
What if instead of talking about "practicing Sabbath" we would talk about entering Sabbath.
Abraham Heschel was a Jewish rabbi who saw Sabbath as a "palace in time".
That is, he understood that Sabbath was already there, time set apart by God from the first week
of creation. The doors of the palace open to us every seventh day. All we have to do is step
inside.
All we have to do is enter Sabbath.
Heschel's daughter, Susannah, gives this account of entering Sabbath:

*When my father raised his kiddush cup on Friday evenings , closed his eyes , and chanted the
prayer sanctifying the wine , I always felt a rush of emotion . As he chanted with an old , sacred
family melody , he blessed the wine and the Sabbath with his prayer , and I also felt he was
blessing my life and that of everyone at the table . I treasured those moments . Friday evenings in
my home were the climax of the week , as they are for every religious Jewish family . My mother
and I kindled the lights for the Sabbath , and all of a sudden I felt transformed , emotionally and
even physically . After lighting the candles in the dining room , we would walk into the living
room , which had windows overlooking the Hudson River , facing west , and we would marvel at
the sunset that soon arrived . The sense of peace that came upon us as we kindled the lights was
created , in part , by the hectic tension of Fridays . Preparation for a holy day , my father often*

said , was as important as the day itself . During the busy mornings my mother shopped for groceries , and in the afternoons the atmosphere grew increasingly nervous as she cooked . My father came home from his office an hour or two before sunset to take care of his own preparations , and as the last minutes of the workweek came close , both of my parents were in the kitchen , frantically trying to remember what they might have forgotten to prepare — Had the kettle boiled ? Was the blech covering the stove ? Was the oven turned on ? Then , suddenly , it was time : twenty minutes before sunset . Whatever hadn't been finished in the kitchen we simply left behind as we lit the candles and blessed the arrival of the Sabbath . My father writes , “ The Sabbath comes like a caress , wiping away fear , sorrow and somber memories . ”
(Introduction to The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel)

Entering Sabbath...

Can we live in such a way that everyone is allowed to enter?

Or will we leave behind the grocery clerk

And the waitress

and the student with mounds of homework

and the factory worker who will lose his job if he doesn't work 7 days a week

and the team member who will lose her place on the field if she refuses to play on the Sabbath,

and the administrative assistant who will lose our respect if she doesn't respond to our emails on Sunday afternoon?

Will we take seriously that this palace in time is essential for the spiritual, physical and emotional health of our little children? Do we understand that by entering the palace of Sabbath, we are providing a fundamental component of community wellness?

Well, we are in a heap of trouble,

but these Bible stories also provide us with a mountain of hope.

There is an “If” “then” pattern in the stories.

In the gospel it is implied:

If your donkey is thirsty, then you lead him to water.

If a daughter of Abraham is bound by Satan, then she shall be set free by Christ.

In the Isaiah story

If you stop with this yoke of crazy laws and accusations and calling everyone evil

if you offer your food to the hungry

If satisfy the needs of those who are abused and oppressed and struck down at every turn in life

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,

If you call the Sabbath a delight

If you glory in it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

Then you will begin to see a change not only in yourselves but in your community:

Then your light shall rise in the darkness

Then your gloom be like the noonday.

Then You are going to be like a fresh water spring for your neighbors

Then the ruins of your town will be rebuilt

Then generations to come will remember it was you who restored Tontogany.
Then your relationship with God will be sweet
Then your spirit will soar
Then, like the woman who was bound,
You will be set free
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Now may our God of Sabbath
Swing wide the doors of the Palace of Time
And call to you in
honor, laughter, love and peace.