

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.23.25
Proper 13C

Isaiah 58:9-14

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, 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. 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. 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. 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; 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

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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." 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 to water? 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?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him. (435)

There are two versions of the fourth commandment, the one that secures the Sabbath as holy.

This shouldn't surprise us. There are two versions of the Ten Commandments, one in the book of Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. Indeed, there are two versions of several stories in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible—two creation stories, two versions of the flood. It's thought there were two peoples living in the land who each had similar foundational stories, which came to be woven together in what would become the Torah for the Jews, the Pentateuch for Christians. With the creation stories, they're kept intact and laid side by side, Genesis chapters one and two. With the flood stories, they're woven together, verse by verse, Genesis chapters six to nine. With the Ten Commandments, they're spaced more apart, one version in Exodus and the

other version two books later in Deuteronomy. So, two versions, two versions of all ten commandments, and therefore two versions of the fourth.

The conflict here between Jesus and the Pharisees: it seems to me it's a conflict that comes from the fact of these two versions. The Pharisees here are focused on one version of the fourth commandment while Jesus is focused on the other.

Of course, that's not the only source of the conflict. The Pharisees and Jesus had a lot to argue about. The gospel record is full of their arguments. The Pharisees were sure they had the best way forward for the people, particularly during this century of crisis. Jesus, by contrast, thought he had the better way, indeed thought he *was* the better way.

It's important to remember that, at the time of Jesus living, the Temple still stood, and the crisis was only felt in its coming, but it was very much felt (if very slowly) coming. It had been a couple of centuries, skirmishes between the people Israel and their Roman imperial overlords. Attack and counter-attack, uprising and crack down. At the time of Jesus' living, the first half of the first century, there were regular outbreaks of violence, freedom fighters from among the Jews and imperial guards to "keep the peace."

At the time of Luke's writing of Jesus, however, the Temple had already fallen, and the city Jerusalem had already been destroyed. The people Israel were being decimated and scattered into the hills, forced into a diaspora that would last two millennia, only ended in the 20th century—and then to mixed results, the state of Israel tragically mixed results, being both impositional but also crucial.

This scattering, this diaspora: it scattered not only the people but also threw into question their practices—how now to be a people, what marked them as a people? Without the Temple and all its attending ways of gathering and of being a people—their priests, their sacrifices, their binding ways—what were they? *Who* were they? And what were they to do to remain that way?

Like when your parents sell the family home: who are you now as a family, where will you gather to reaffirm that way and identity? This, but much, much more profound, and traumatic.

The Pharisees were keepers of the Law. They weren't priests as would preside at the altar in the Temple. They weren't Temple-based at all. They lived and worked out in the villages among the people. Many more in number than priests, they taught in synagogues and guided the people in the living of their days, so people could safely live within the bounds of the Law.

Which explains why Jesus tangled with Pharisees long before he arrived in Jerusalem. Once there, he would encounter Sadducees, scribes, eventually the Sanhedrin, all people based in the

Temple or in Jerusalem, the capital city where the empire had its foothold. But while still on the way, he would encounter Pharisees, tangle with Pharisees, because that's where the Pharisees were to be found and because Jesus had a different way in mind, one in which the law for right living was less delineated, more intuited, less spelled out and more sensed from within. It was a law to be written on people's hearts, as the prophet Jeremiah promised would come, and it consisted in one commandment: love.

It's easy to sound chauvinistic when speaking of this. It's easy to sound as if Jesus' way were better, simply and obviously better, something to be *proud* of for people like us who follow Christ more than we would the Pharisees. Like, we don't need an external law because our hearts are pure, we don't need an external authority to whom to be accountable because we are accountable to the spirit and our conscience. It's easy to fall into Christian supremacism over and against Judaism as that is a practice more of law than grace. "Our religion is of higher mind, it's not so rule-bound, is rather of the higher spirit!" We must work to recognize the folly in professing Christian grace over against Jewish law.

Christianity can slide into all sorts of unaccountability and self-justification. Since there is no actual Christian law, since there is no Jesus-blessed body of authority in the world to whom the Christian is to be held to account, it's easy for us to slide into all sorts of behavior that justifies itself. Grace is no guarantee for righteousness—except in its ultimacy. Grace will win in the ultimate, on the last day. Grace will abound. God's glory will be the all-in-all. But in the unfolding of history, grace is no guarantee. It can, on the contrary, be a permission slip. "Because I am saved by grace, I can do whatever the hell I want."

Like the Prius driver with the private jet.

Which is why Jesus was felt as such a threat. Which is why Jesus is still such a threat. To good order, to godly living, grace is thin gruel where the law can be thick, can hold us in ways (turns out) we need to be held, we need to be bound.

Bound. Binding. Turns out, we need such things. For now, any way.

Which, here, Jesus understood himself very much working in terms of, indeed working *against*: "And ought not this woman," he asked the Pharisees, "...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?" See, he meant to set her free from what bound her, just as we so often see in scripture when it comes to binding and what binds us. Scripture is of two minds about it. *Akedah* is the word in Hebrew for binding, as in the binding of Isaac when his father was commanded to

sacrifice him, and the unbinding of Isaac when his father was told to let him go. Like the Law that would bind the people, and yet would terribly often go slack so that injustice reigned, so it must be tighter. Or it was perhaps itself the problem?

See, scripture itself seems to toggle on this question, God himself seems to toggle on this question, how much binding is too much binding, and how can you tell when something of binding is allowance from the Lord that we don't violate one another because the ties that bind are blessed, and how can we tell something of binding is of Satan, as here with this woman who, so enslaved to it, couldn't even stand up straight?

Conversely, how little of being bound is too little for the likes of us, we who will tell ourselves all sorts of stories about how it's okay for me to do this, and do that? That no one will notice if I try this, or take that? I'm saved, I'm free, I can do what I want and trust that what I want is right for me to want, right for me to do? Circular logic. Self-serving logic.

The one version of the fourth commandment goes like this: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." Rest. God-blessed rest.

The other version of the fourth commandment goes like this: "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." Liberty. God-ordained liberty.

See, the one version of the fourth commandment imagines rest and restoration to be the heart of it. In resting, in giving yourself and your household time for restoration, you are imitating God who also rested, and such is to keep the Sabbath.

The other version is about liberty, being released from the bondage that the people Israel knew in Egypt. In resting, in refraining from work, you are practicing freedom, and that is to keep

the Sabbath. Likewise, in unbinding others, in allowing them their freedom, you are keeping the Sabbath.

“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

“Woman, you are set free.”

In this way, though Jesus did work on the Sabbath, he also freed on the Sabbath. For to be unbound, to be released from bondage and to allow others this same state of grace: this is the Lord’s will. But this, of course, was to violate one emphasis in honoring the other, which is one problem with such rule-bound living: very often the rules contradict themselves.

I think of a time I needed to fill out some official paperwork, very official, a witness statement for a foreign passport to be applied for here. I was to fill in the full name. Last, first, middle. I was to use the little squares, one for each letter of the name. If I violated any of these guidelines, the application would be invalid. There weren’t enough squares for all the letters.

Absurd as the law can be, however, we’re not ready for life without it. At least that seems to be what the Lord discovered, over and over again discovered. The long story of God-with-us, the story whose beginnings are recounted in the Bible and whose ending is yet to be lived into, is a story of God discovering what liberty we’re ready for and what of binding we yet need, discovering also that forms of binding expire or go slack, that new forms are needed for re-enchantment, for renewal.

That’s where we are in Isaiah, for what it’s worth. The reading from Isaiah this morning has us in 3rd Isaiah, the third portion of this long book of prophecy, the portion when the people were preparing for return. The first portion, about 40 chapters, has us in that period of foreboding, just prior to when Babylon would attack, would destroy the land and the city and the Temple, and would take the people into exile. The second portion, about fifteen chapters, has us amidst the exile, when the people were lonely for their land and practices and one another, when they yearned for the Lord and could only hardly sing the Lord’s songs in this painfully foreign land. The 3rd portion, about ten chapters, comes to us from fifty years later, when return and rebuilding were a possibility. A likelihood! They would re-establish their ways and thereby their righteousness. Indeed, they would get it right this time.

Until they wouldn’t. Really, daily they wouldn’t. Being people and all, daily would come the absurdities of the law, any law; or a blind eye of the law, a loophole, a moment of opportunity.

As often as we get it right, we seem to get it wrong.

So, Jesus. Five hundred years hence, Jesus: he as the one who has come from the end of all things to live with us amidst the middle. He who hastens that process, foretells a liberty we're not yet ready for, even enacts a liberty we can't yet live up to—because we really can't be trusted to regulate ourselves, and yet God has in mind that we can. Each of us moderating our own behavior. Each of us deciding for ourselves, what we shall and shall not do, what I shall and shall not do?

Because of love? Because of love of neighbor and even stranger, alien and even enemy? Do you really trust that? Do you trust yourself? Do you trust that other person?

The gospel would have it that you do. The gospel call is that you must. That's the only way the world shall abound. That's the only way we shall all grow beyond binding, grow a-bound. Joy a-bound. Nourishing plenty a-bound. Abundance is God's vision for the world, and this means living beyond the sorts of binding we yet rely on.

There is tremendous risk in grace! The Pharisees police the streets, make them safe to travel on. Jesus would have the Pharisees irrelevant and would have us trust and act accordingly, follow in mutual faith.

Are you ready for that? Are we?

Because that's what the call is. That's what we're to aim for, hope for, work for. If it's not yet, it is that it shall be, Jesus calling from the future just as he did as Lazarus' tomb: "Unbind them and let them go."

So, we must get ready. We are here to get ready, to practice unto perfection the Lord's risky liberty.

Thanks be to God.