

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost  
Sermon 8.21.22

### Isaiah 58:9b-14

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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;<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are **set free** from your ailment."<sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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?<sup>16</sup> 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?"<sup>17</sup> 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. (429)

There are two versions of this fourth commandment. The fourth commandment, the one to secure the Sabbath as holy: there are two versions of it. The Pharisees seem to emphasize one of them. Jesus seems to emphasize the other.

There are actually two versions of the whole Ten Commandments. One is in the book, Exodus. The other is in the book, Deuteronomy.

This shouldn't surprise us. There are two versions of a lot of the things in the Old Testament, the Torah, the first five books. Two creation stories. Two flood stories. It's thought there were two neighboring peoples who had these founding narratives, and as these two peoples grew together, so did their narratives. Eventually, when the editors of what would become the Torah set about putting the collection together, they either laid the stories side by side, as with the two creation stories, or they wove them together, as with the two flood stories, which read as one though with nearly verse by verse repetition.

As for two versions of the Ten Commandments, the earlier one is when these utterances were first received. Exodus has us in the wilderness with Moses and the people, when they were just starting out as a people. The later one is when these utterances are remembered. Deuteronomy has us at the edge of the Promised Land, with Moses preaching three sermons before the people would enter the Land and Moses would just prior die and be laid to rest.

The version in Exodus of the fourth commandment goes like this: “Remember the Sabbath day to 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. On it you shall not do any work—you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” See, here the reason for the Sabbath is to imitate God. The problem the Sabbath is meant to address is the problem of forgetting, or failing to imitate, God, and its solution is to imitate the LORD God as at the beginning, in rest, in restoration—imitation as a way of honoring and remembering.

This seems to be the chief concern for the Pharisees who took such issue with what Jesus had done. Liberating the woman, setting her free from an ailment that was putting her in a physically subservient position: in so doing, Jesus was failing to imitate God on this day. Working as he did, Jesus was failing to honor the day by failing to imitate God in his holy rest.

And, of course, we know the Pharisees are the bad guys so it’s easy to cast their concerns as bad. Their obsession with rules makes us suspicious of the rules.

But the Pharisees weren’t bad. At least, I think it’s a mistake to think of the Pharisees as wholly and monolithically bad.

What they were was many, for starters. which means they were as varied as any group of people are. What’s more, they were the keepers of good social order. Their dictates kept people safe from what could be communicable disease. Their legal interpretation kept steady the dynamics among the populace. Certainly, they were the elites among the people, but you can make a good argument for having elites in charge.

To be honest, I’ve always chaffed at the idea of “elites” being “in charge.” But lately, with the rise of populism, with its reactive rejection of so much the gives shape and form to our lives together, I’m not so sure.

Last week, I went to see Rage Against the Machine with Tobias, a metal-rap-protest band I first saw a couple times in the 90s and would again in 2020 but for COVID. Twice postponed, it finally happened.

They were awesome as ever, but it all landed a little differently. Their most famous song has at its heart a chant that I won't quote here but I'll paraphrase. It goes something like, "Forget you, I won't do what you tell me." And I loved it. Back in the day, I loved it. I'd rage against the machine—the machine of consumer capitalism and militarism, the machine of patriarchy and the male gaze. I'd rage against all these soulless machines with those words on my lips.

Now, though, that sort of reactivity and rejection: it landed differently in my hearing, in my heart.

And maybe it's just that I'm older now.

Maybe it's that I'm a sell-out: I have become the machine. Or maybe it's that the machine has itself become so reactive. The song used to come to a context where power structures seemed entirely too unresponsive to the people, hegemonic, monolithic. Now it's all just reactivity. Now the song comes with images of January 6<sup>th</sup>, people who think they can burn it all down with hardly a worry of how much harder it is to rebuild.

So, those Pharisees: at least they had principles. At least they had a standard against which their practice as Pharisees was to be measured. They had the Law of God, the Torah, by which to be measured. They answered to something beyond themselves. Theirs wasn't a rule wasn't *just* about power, and it certainly wasn't nihilistic. Though perhaps cynical, it was also about well-being.

...not that they were doing so well by that standard.

It had been a long time since they had, half a millennium, or closer to a millennium—if ever they had. It's hard to get a whole nation of people to behave justly, to behave ethically, morally. It's harder still to get two nations to do it: Israel and Judea. They were supposed to be different. They were supposed to be *good*. From their founding as a people, or as two peoples, in the wilderness, they were supposed to be good.

Turns out, that's easier said than done.

But say it, they would.

Hence the prophets. The prophets were all about reminding the people, and their leaders, how they were to be—to be in regard to one another, to be as different in the world.

Hence the prophecy of Isaiah, especially as we heard this morning. Speaking to the people as they reoccupied their land, Isaiah is now the third of his kind to speak. This long book of prophecy is likely three books of prophecy, three prophets speaking in the name and spirit of Isaiah and speaking from three moments in time. First Isaiah prophesied among the people from prior to the fall of Jerusalem and Judah, around 586 before Christ, but you could feel it coming. Doom. Destruction. Babylon was coming. Second Isaiah prophesied among the people during the exile, around 550 before Christ, when Babylon had attacked, had overtaken, had marshalled the worthy people among Israel and Judea to come live as Babylonians, while leaving the unworthy ones—old, young, sick, weak—to die amidst the rubble. Third Isaiah prophesied when the people had been freed to return and rebuild, around 536 before Christ.

It would be a new beginning.

It would be a restoration to the way things should be, should always have been. “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.” If the people live justly, they will thrive. If the people were to live communally, there would be freedom and flourishing. No exploitation. No cause for conflict. They would have peace among them and would attract little attention from beyond them. Other nations might look to them for inspiration as to how to live but would be unlikely to look to them as good for looting. They’d be simply too about the basics for that.

You know, the Amish don’t lock their doors. They ward off thieves by not having much worth stealing. They just live modestly, take care of one another. Their riches are of the sort that can’t be stolen. It could be like that for Israel, for Judea. They could be rich not in things but clearly in soul.

Because some ways of being inspire a clash while other ways of being inspire cooperation or comradery. If what’s at stake is either glory or shame, then the way things play out is one big, long struggle. If what’s at stake is freedom and flourishing, then the way things play out is a lot different. I recently had to reframe a dynamic I’d been brought into. Someone approached as if we’re in for a fight. The thing is, I agree with her. I want to work with her on this project she’s got in mind. But she keeps coming at it as if it’s her way or no way. I keep trying to reframe it, energize it with a new sort of spirit, a holier sort of spirit.

When my nephew was four years old, five years old, he’d argue everything. My bother-in-law would describe as someone who wouldn’t take “yes” for an answer.

It's the spirit of the thing.

Did you notice Jesus thought this crippled woman was bound by Satan? If so, did that take you by surprise, as it did for those at Bible study this week? Did it seem a little out of the blue?

Satan is less an entity than a mode, less a being than a mode of being. *Ha-Satan* is the name, a Hebrew word for the spirit whose mode is accusatory, the one who generates a dynamic through accusation and acrimony—the pointing of the finger, so to speak.

Because, you can get a lot going by being against certain people or certain things, by gathering with others in a common against-ness. Such a spirit of one-ups-man-ship is actually the easiest mode to slip into, at least for those of us steeped in this culture, our culture. Have you ever found yourself on four-lane road at a red light? The light turns green, and you suddenly feel you're in a drag race with the car next to you. And you're only trying to get the grocery store. What the heck? The other person might not even be going to the grocery store, and, if so, probably won't be getting the last of everything on your list. So, ease up. Ease on down the road. We're all in it together.

What this has to do with the woman bent and crippled, what this has to do with her being bound by Satan, is that this is what such zero-sum living looks like, what it *feels* like. When you live by such a spirit where there are winners and there are losers, this is what it looks when all is said and done. Some people just lose, just lose and lose and lose. They start out a little behind and they never catch up. There are those for whom getting out of the hole life landed them in is just never gonna happen: they'll work their fingers raw just getting to the level ground from which others got a good go in life. There are those who'll never get the chance to stand up straight, to look others in the eye. It wasn't her fault Satan had bound her. The satanic isn't an individual ailment, and it certainly isn't an individual's fault. The satanic is a social disease, which some poor sods come to suffer more than others. But it's everyone's problem.

This woman is the physical embodiment of the station countless people hold in life, or are held by in life, or are held *back* in life, held *down* in life. They don't stand a chance. They don't stand at all.

Except maybe with Jesus. Except maybe with Jesus' people, Jesus' church. Maybe in such places as this? Maybe among such people as us? Maybe here everyone stands full and free, on equal footing.

Here's another thing to notice about this encounter between the bent woman and Jesus: this is the only time in all the gospel record Jesus is remembered to have healed someone in terms

of setting them free. Elsewhere, people are made well or are saved, are healed or are cleansed. Here, this woman is set free—for, here, the problem is bondage.

The other version of the fourth commandment: this is how it goes: “Observe the Sabbath day, to 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. On it you shall not do any work—you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male and female servant may rest as well as you. You shall 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.” See, here the reason for the Sabbath is to resist the exploitation of labor, to honor as equal those in a state of servitude. The Sabbath is a resistance to slave economies, and to enslaving economies, enslaving dynamics and ways of life.

This is the spin on the fourth commandment that Jesus seems to have preferred. And, by freeing this woman from being bound and bent, the very physical manifestation of subservience, exploitation, he wasn’t disregarding the Sabbath as holy, he was fulfilling it, making the Sabbath come home to this woman and therefore to all. None of us is free unless all of us are free.

And there’s so little we can do to change the machine. There’s so little we can do to retool things so justice reigns and freedom unfurls and human beings flourish, all creation flourishes. There’s so little we can do.

Except here.

Here, in this sanctuary, now in this sabbath, we can gather by an altogether different spirit than that. Here we gather by the power of the holy spirit, who’d have no winners and no losers but all free and equal to enjoy the blessings in life.

I’ll keep that sort of sabbath any old day of the week, and twice on Sundays.

Thanks be to God.