

Helping Each Other Stand Up

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

Do you know that old saying; *don't throw the baby out with the bathwater*? It means when we're discarding things we no longer need, we should be careful not to throw out what is essential.

The church, through two thousand years of our history has had to decide in each generation, what do we keep and what do we throw out? What are we trying to do here? What is the heart and soul of our faith?

Before Christianity was even born, the people Israel had also been doing that for thousands of years. They had to discern, for each generation, what was the true heart of worship? What are the real and essential Sabbath practices that belong to the people of God?

Is it pews and pipe organs? Is it hymns from a hundred years ago, and the prayers our great great grandparents said? What is essential, and what's just made up?

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning we are listening to a prophet try to explain that. Biblical scholars tell us that Isaiah was not written by one prophet, some guy named Isaiah, but by at least three different prophets writing for three different generations, and each of them trying to explain to the people what is the true and right worship of God.

Scholars call these first, second, and third Isaiah, although they are all lumped together in our holy book. Second Isaiah, with its beautiful lyric passages, such as "Comfort Comfort O my people," and the servant songs we read, was written to a people living in exile in Babylon; written to a generation who had never been to Israel. The prophet seeks to comfort them and assure them that God will lead them home.

Our reading this morning comes from Third Isaiah. It is written to the generation who actually made the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem, to the land of their ancestors, intending to reclaim the land and rebuild the temple. But things haven't gone like the prophet promised they would, and the people cannot believe what a mess their life is, and how everything has seemed to go wrong.

The prophet reminds them that God is faithful, but for God to be present and active in their lives, there are some things that they must do:

*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.*

Then, the prophet says, your temple will be re-buildable. You will be able to repair all that was destroyed or broken.

Proper worship, he says, is taking care of others, not just getting yourself to the ruined temple and lifting up your prayers.

In our New Testament reading from Luke, Jesus continues that same message. He is teaching in the synagogue when a woman walks in who is so bent double she can't see anything but the ground before her feet. For eighteen years she's been this burdened.

Jesus, when he sees her, immediately stops what he's doing and heals her. He knows people are more important than rituals and practices, so he lays his hands upon her, and she stands up straight and praises God.

The leader of the synagogue gets indignant. Curing broken people looks like work to him, so he scolds the people not to come looking for healing on Sabbath. Sabbath is for rest and worship; they should seek healing on the other six days of the week.

Now let's not make the synagogue leaders bad people. Let's recognize that this conversation is really about good people discerning what is central to their worship, what it means to keep the Sabbath, and what it means to be faithful to God.

Because both of these stories remind us of something we all already know: it's really confusing to love and serve God. God doesn't speak up so all of us can hear, and say, *here are the things you all need to be doing*. God is silent to most of us, and so every generation is left to figure out again, what are the important practices of our faith; what is central to worship and pleasing to God?

These texts are clear, and agree with each other. People matter more than rituals. When we reach out to help the burdened, when we do justice to those afflicted or hungry or discriminated against, we can be sure that this worship will lead us to God.

And Jesus is clear. The time is *now*. *Now* is the time to free others from their burdens, and the Sabbath practice we most need to keep is to help other people stand up.

I am thinking of lettuce pickers in the Imperial Valley, bent over crops of romaine lettuce, crawling down rows that go on mile after mile.

I am thinking of pear pickers here in the Rogue Valley whose backs are burdened with canvas sacks holding fifty or sixty pounds of fancy, gourmet pears.

I am thinking of gay or transgender teenagers who have been told that their lives are inherently sinful. That they are not children of God.

I am thinking civil rights activists in Honduras, being tortured and assassinated by killers our U. S. Army trains. The Latin American poor who are told their lives matter less than our corporate interests.

I am thinking of single mothers who work two or three jobs while raising their children.

I am thinking of lonely elders who nobody visits in foster care homes.

I am thinking that we don't always know what church is, what God is, or what we ought to be doing. But we can be certain that it is always the right moment to help lift other people's lives and burdens, to help other people stand up.

I am thinking of our sister, Gayle Price, who lights our altar candles at the start of our worship, and who sometimes comes up to the pulpit in the middle of our service, to pray for us and preach.

In a lot of churches Gayle would be told to sit down and not disturb the worship service. But here we know that proper worship is helping our sister stand up. Stand up and be seen in a world that says she should be hidden, and be heard in a world that tells her she surely has nothing to say.

We are a busy church, an active congregation. In the next few months we have three political actions planned: an Immigration Rally, a Gay Pride march, and a peace march to close the U. S. Army's School of the Americas. We have choir practice and book groups, men's fellowship, and potlucks; we have bible study and Taize, and weekly meditation groups. But maybe the most important thing that we do here is help our sister stand up.

How will you incorporate that true worship of God into your busy life? There are so many ways to do it. You can be loud and proud in a demonstration, or quietly sit with a stranger in their foster care home. People matter more than wealth, rituals, or things. I think it's as simple as that.