The Keeping of the Sabbath
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Year C, Ordinary 21
Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17
24 August 2025

The keeping of the sabbath, the prophet Isaiah declares, is part of the deal to be in right relationship with Yahweh. Along with **doing** what Yahweh requires, ensuring all in the community receive their rightful share of the bounty and blessing of God. As the people enact God's community of caring and inclusion, rewards from Yahweh are promised. I wonder, is the reward the experience of the community as caring and inclusion, justice and equity are enacted, or do we still expect an interventionist God to drop blessings from heaven?

The pairing of this passage from Isaiah with today's gospel, also about the keeping of Sabbath, is curious. On the face of it, it sounds as if Jesus wants to **undo** the words of Isaiah. Responding to human need on the Sabbath, in this instance, takes priority over keeping the Sabbath sacred and separate, God indwelling time.

We're in the season of the prophets. Each week we've heard from Hosea, Jeremiah, then Isaiah. It coincides with me reading Richard Rohr's latest book, The Tears of Things, themed around the role of the prophet. Considering today's gospel, I was interested to read Rohr suggesting "The best way to interpret most of [Jesus'] healing stories is to look at the whys. … If you read these stories as if Jesus is only performing miraculous medical cures, you might think "Wow!" for five seconds. But when you ask why the healing was needed, you have a whole new way of seeing what needs to change, which is invariably the bigger power structure: the institutionalized

evils that no longer look evil."[1] The context of the healing directs our attention to what Jesus is calling us to consider.

Of today's gospel, **why** was the woman bent over? Immediately following her healing, the leader of the synagogue reprimands Jesus for taking such action on the Sabbath. On the face of it, mindful of the words from Isaiah, the leader is justified. Sabbath keeping, time to not do, to rest in being, to be filled and renewed, is vital for our health and wellbeing and to be right with God. Thinking of Rohr's question of "why?" is this challenge to the religious authority just about Sabbath keeping? Or is it broader, about the spirit of their priorities? Keeping the Sabbath rule is more important that relieving a person of their binding, unable to straighten and realize their full stature as God's unique and blessed creation.

Is there something about power assumed, taken, dictated here. From genuine beginnings, authentic intentions, it doesn't take long for nudging reminders we hear in Isaiah, the choices we make change the outcomes of life and living, to become strict and binding rule and law. We evolve systems for identity, belonging, safety and certainty for all the right reasons. If it weren't for such systems and traditions, would we be here today? But they rigidify. Which isn't to suggest there was ever an ideal, faithful model of community we somehow are meant to return to enacting. The God-bothering way is forever being worked out within and among real people in real time. However, if we recognize these systems have come to bind, rather than free, today's gospel nudges us again. If we have eyes to see, ears to hear, we can do differently.

One of the joys of having grandchildren is you get to read the latest children's stories. Once Upon a Dragon's Fire by Beatrice Blue tells of a village of cold darkness, because of the dragon. No one's seen the dragon, but all the stories in the books in the village told of the dangerous, scaly, sharp clawed and toothed creature who kept the village in darkness. All were afraid, except 2 children, who delighted in telling the terrifying tales. One day there was the worst storm ever. The 2 children decide to go and negotiate with the dragon. Eventually they find the cave the dragon's in.

[1] Rohr, R. (2025). *The Tears of Things*. Convergent Books, 19,20

But the dragon matches none of the stories they know, no claws or sharp teeth, rather the dragon's cold and sad and lonely. The 2 children decide to cheer the dragon up by reading it their stories. But they realise all the stories are about the dragon and aren't true. So, they decide to tell the story differently, about the actual dragon they're with. Gradually the dragon brightens, for the first time it breathes fire and, needless to say, light and warmth and everything changes. One moral of the story is that making the smallest change to the story we tell, from our experience, can change everything.

Today's gospel may cause us to reflect whether our religious systems have come to bind rather than free, push us to consider whether they tend to myopia. A preoccupation with things only of concern to those within its walls, fearful, as if its very life depends upon correct observance. Meanwhile the world, unaware, drifts away. Religion is not alone in this - every human institution is myopic to some degree.

The tradition of the prophet we claim, is located largely within the Judaic storyline. This is where the stories we know arise. Each week the warnings we hear from Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah seem to resonate as aptly now as then. With heavy sigh, , weighed down, we might wonder if anything can ever change.

Reflecting on the prophet Amos, Rohr proposes Amos "issues his prophecy to the collective, rather than to individuals."[2] "This concentration on the collective," Rohr suggests, "changes our moral focus entirely. If we do not recognize that evil first and foundationally resides in the group, we will continue to search out, or perhaps forgive, the few 'bad apples' thinking that will take care of our problems. But, too often, sins we condemn in the individual are admired, or at least given cultural pass, at the corporate level. Consider some of the contradictions in [American] culture"[3] "The prophets … learned that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity. … They

[2] Rohr, 21
[3] Rohr, 22

attacked hidden cultural assumptions more than they did the people caught up in them."[4]

We participate as part of a collective. It's hard to see the ways it's wired into us. As long as we remain unaware then we, like the village in the children's story, will keep telling the story in the only way we know. Even if the story as it's always been told, is flawed and continues to determine what can be.

Perhaps it's time for us to consider again the Spirit gift of prophecy. The disruptive energy of the unholy order of prophecy, as a corrective to the holy order of church hierarchy. Not to be disruptive in itself - that's easily enough done. But to be willing to be disrupted in ourselves. To see the ways we participate in the collective systems that ensure the status quo of inequity, injustice, and oppression continue. It's risky, it may unhook, or unhinge us. For we're talking about being willing to question and critique the collectives of our belonging and identity. It won't be a popularity move. We won't have to leave but, in seeing things as they are, we may find it harder to stay. We may find we can no longer abide the way the story's told and want to change it. A story that until now has seemed fixed and its outcomes inevitable. But unless some of us do, seed the viability of an alternate story, how will anything change?

[4] Rohr, 24