

11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16C
Isaiah 58:9b-14
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

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My friend Lou was walking through a parking lot, whistling, and a stranger said, “Hey, it’s good to hear someone happy!” Which led to a friendly conversation that left them both feeling even more happy.

I’ve noticed that people seem just the least bit less stressed these days. A little better rested. People seem to laugh more easily and smile more genuinely. The hard lines of their faces have softened some, their gaze is gentler, their words are kinder. I take this as a sign that we’re receiving some Sabbath renewal this summer. Getting away on vacation, breaking the spell, letting go of some burdens, gaining perspective. (I know taking some time away has made me easier to live with, for sure!)

In our hard-driving society, it’s difficult to experience deep rest. We tend to carry our responsibilities in an anxious grip. But if we ever do experience Sabbath here in Oregon, it surely happens now, in August. These sunny days and gentle evenings outdoors, tomatoes ripening, the scent of a neighbor’s barbecue, reunions with family and friends. It does the heart good, and the body too.

We all need deep rest in order to be creative – otherwise we just get stale and crabby. To stay fresh, a leadership expert recommends we take time out to *detach daily, withdraw weekly, and abandon annually*. The Bible understood this wisdom long ago.

Sabbath was built into the rhythm of life God commanded for Israel. One day a week, the people were to do no work. Even today in Israel, everything shuts down on Saturday – just the way it did in the US when “blue laws” used to enforce the Christian sabbath (our Sabbath is Sunday, the day of resurrection).

A scholar explains, *The Hebrew word for Sabbath is shabbat, which means simply to stop. Stop and rest. The world will continue to turn without you. God is God and you are not. The world does not depend on your work and busy-ness. So just stop.*

Even more than this, in the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel were commanded to let their slaves rest on the sabbath, too. God was saying, “Remember how it was to be a slave back in Egypt? Remember how it was to work and work without rest? Well then, don’t do that to another human being.” (adapted from Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, *Sabbath Healing, Sabbath Rest*, 8/14/2022 workingpreacher.org)

The Sabbath was a sign of freedom – the freedom God gave them, and the freedom God wants for all people who are enslaved in any way. Freedom to be fully human, freedom to delight in life, and be free of oppression. This spirit of delight is key – they were meant to “call the sabbath a delight” – a joy, not a burden. God’s people were commanded to protect this day of freedom and aspire to even greater freedom too. Because as Martin Luther King Jr. taught, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

Today’s gospel story happens on the sabbath and revolves around themes of freedom and delight.

Jesus goes to teach in a synagogue but ends up spontaneously healing someone instead. It’s almost a reflex reaction. The bent-over woman doesn’t ask to be healed. Jesus senses her pain and eagerly sets her free from this crippling spirit. For Jesus, healing is urgent. It can’t wait. He knows the sabbath is all about freedom.

See the woman, standing up straight to praise God! Set free from eighteen years of sore muscles, twisted bones, exhausting pain. She embodies freedom and delight!

Not so the synagogue leader, who can only babble: Not today! Come back after the Sabbath! As if he could reverse the tide of God’s liberating power by scolding. This man is deeply afraid. Afraid if he doesn’t follow Sabbath rules perfectly, God will be angry. Or his own reputation will suffer. Or things will get out of control. But you can’t control God’s kin-dom advancing to set people free!

Notice carefully – for here is the insidious evil of this leader’s control issues. He entirely discounts this woman’s humanity. He’s thinking, *It’s been 18 years, she can wait a little longer. Her suffering isn’t that important.* He considers her nothing but collateral damage to the cause of keeping everything in order. Pay attention, for this is how human power structures operate. To stay in control, they justify and discount human suffering. They excuse people’s pain as collateral damage. *We can’t correct racist structures, it would be too disruptive and inconvenient. The people who are suffering should just wait for another day. We can’t reform our health care system, how would that even work? Some day maybe, but not today.* Like many people of privilege, this leader is so preoccupied with protecting his own interests, his compassion has fossilized. He has no capacity for holy delight.

But the crowd knows God’s liberating power when they see it in action. They explode in joy to see their long-suffering friend set free! They know when God is being glorified and blessed, and they catch the delight of what Jesus is up to. Jesus is leading with love and

compassion, enthusiastic to set the world straight, to lift people up, and set everyone free.

When you and I get bound up in our own control issues, or bent out of shape by our own fears and anxieties, it's good to call to mind the sheer joy of that Sabbath when Jesus adjusted the rules to let God's goodness and mercy and joy flow freely. To let people experience the sheer delight of seeing freedom materialize right before their eyes.

That Sabbath teaches us there is no time when it's inappropriate for human healing to occur. And there's nothing that happens which God cannot use in some way to bring goodness and healing and new life.

As compassionate people, we tend to be very tuned in to the world's suffering and pain. Anxiety is something we may have to push back against, in order to preserve the hope and delight God wants to give us.

Yes, there are urgent needs that break our hearts, which we cannot immediately resolve. Homelessness is an immediate and grave concern. The world's violence. Poverty and racism and greed, the list is long. Each of us also have personal burdens we are not able to let go of. We carry the burdens of illness, family responsibilities, money trouble, grief, loneliness, fear, this list is long too. We carry burdens that will not and cannot magically disappear – we are in need of healing that takes time. Healing that we bring before God in prayer, and trust, even today.

Yet even in the face of trouble, we are urged to claim the spirit of delight and joy for our faith. To allow Jesus's spirit of enthusiastic, loving compassion and eager, joyful caring to lift us up and carry us along. Allow Jesus to open our spirits to God's hope and peace. Because we are never in this kin-dom work alone. It is God's work, after all. We are all being swept up in God's unfolding promise to mend the entire universe. There is nothing that can stop God's freedom enterprise. And nothing that can prevent us from joining in God's work of setting creation free.

This time of worship we are experiencing today, this Sabbath we share each week, is a fresh opportunity to imagine and envision a world beyond what we see today, a world beyond present limits and conditions. We envision together a world that fully expresses God's love and cherishing of every living being, and we ask how we can contribute.

On this Sabbath, we invite God to infuse some creativity into the stuck places of our lives – the places we feel tapped out, the dead ends we seem to face (which are never dead ends to God). We ask God to create some fresh ideas, to open some new doors.

We invite God to rearrange our hearts and rearrange our energy in the direction of love and grace.

For we can be sure of this: *God is good. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* For a time, today, we can simply rest in God's goodness, we can delight in God's loving character and God's boundless compassion. We can meet our living Lord in bread and wine and let our souls be fed.

And we can take a Sabbath break from whatever burdens our souls. We can lay those burdens at the foot of the cross, or maybe we place them in the hands of Jesus that are extended in gentle love to us. We entrust our cares to God. Praying for freedom, for liberation, for healing, for ourselves and for all.

And we remember that beautiful things can happen. God does lift people up. God does grant freedom.

I know a woman who went through some tough years as a teenager and young adult. She didn't feel good about herself, and over time she developed a serious addiction that held her back. She was tall, but growing up she always walked with her shoulders hunched, her chest caved in, as if to take up as little space as possible. I'm happy to say that many years later, she is on a better path as an adult. She's clean and sober through a lot of hard work, and proud of it. She has a new sense of herself and who she is. She is able to hold her head up high – and she literally does hold her head high. Now, when this woman stands straight and tall, her energetic presence fills a room, she looks you in the eye, and it literally feels like she's two or three inches taller than she used to be. Like the bent-over woman, she has experienced healing, in God's time, and it is a delight to behold.

This is what God intends for every person. That we and all people be set free from the burdens that weigh us down. That every child of earth be able to stand up straight and tall and proud and joyful, knowing we are somebody, knowing we are delightfully free in God's love, and free to share that love too. God intends for each person to have what they need to live, in safety and health, in dignity, and develop their God-given gifts. This is God's inspiration, and it is our inspiration, never to give in to despair, but to hold onto hope that is rooted in who God is, and the healing, freeing work God is doing even now, even today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.