

DCCCP 8/21/22 - So Far as it Depends on Us

Last week we looked at a section of the book of Hebrews that offers examples of “a great cloud of witnesses” called into God’s service.

The writer encourages us to use them as examples of service for our lives as we run this race of life with perseverance, following their example in our lives and keeping Jesus as the prime example and perfecter of our faith.

Looking just beyond those verses, we come to Hebrews 12: verse 14 which encourages us to “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone” This is essentially a quote from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome; Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” This must be an important concept for us to consider.

Our sermon and our opening sentences this morning are based on Romans chapter 12 verses 2, 16 and this verse 18.

When we reverse the order of these verses and form an if/then statement, these words serve to inform us that the evidence of our faith is found in the outcome of our living. In other words, how we live is a powerful testimony to our faith.

It reads as follows:

If we can live in harmony with one another; not be arrogant, but associating with everyone, and not claiming to be wiser than we are.

If we live peaceably with everyone, so far as it depends on us:

Then we will no longer be conformed to this world, but will be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The evidence is in the outcome, so far as it depends on us.

It is, again, a powerful testimony to our faith.

And it does, in truth, depend on us.

Our Presbyterian heritage includes a clear understanding that the act of exercising our faith is an act of the individual conscience of each of us. This recognition of faith has been with the church since these words were first adopted into the Presbyterian form of government in 1788. (234 years ago)

Our current Book of Order, which governs the church's structure and worship, quotes that original document saying: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men"^{1,2}

Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable. Freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.³

So, we each discern what scripture is saying to us within the life and the body of the church, as our conscience guides us.

Our first reading today from Isaiah 58 is from what most scholars and theologians call the third book of Isaiah.

It takes very little research to see that the book Isaiah as a whole was written by at least 3 authors and possibly many more.

Within the 66 chapters of that book, most of chapters 1-39 were likely the only ones written in the time of the actual prophet Isaiah, by him and his scribes.

Chapters 40-55 are set in the time of Judah's exile to Babylon, over 100 years after Isaiah's death and chapters 56-66 are set in the post-Babylon return to Jerusalem, some 70 years yet later, during the rebuilding of the city, temple, and walls around the city.

This is where Chapter 58 resides; back in Jerusalem.⁴ The Jewish nation was threatened, overtaken, exiled, and then returned to Jerusalem to rebuild it from its ruins. The Hebrew people have been through an awful lot.

This section of Isaiah poses two if/then statements and responses for us.

If you do away with oppression, accusations and gossip and instead help the hungry and the burdened **then**, you will be prosperous and will be successful rebuilding Jerusalem.

If you follow the sabbath instead of doing your own thing and speaking your own self-serving words, **then** you will be joyful in the land given to your ancestors by God.

¹ The words "men" and "man's" throughout this quotation from the eighteenth century should be understood as applying to all persons.

² See the Westminster Confession of Faith (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.109). Entire statement is from the PCUSA Book of Order (2019-2022) section F-3.01.

³ G-2.0104

⁴ John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2004, 307–309.

It's not a stretch to understand that the prophet speaks for a reason - and the opposite of what the 3rd Isaiah prophet spoke constituted an on-the-scene report of what was actually going on after the people returned to Jerusalem; oppression, accusations, gossip, separation between the favored and the hungry and between those who were burdened with life's hardness, and those who were not.

The sabbath had been forgotten or, trivialized and scandalized, and it was up to the people to choose to do better. It depended on them, but they were not living at peace with God nor with anyone else. It was a time of strife.

In our second reading, from the Gospel of Luke, care of those in need and the conduct of the sabbath is also stands at center stage.

The scene is from Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

¹⁵ The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? **16** Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

Jesus told the leaders of the synagogue: open your eyes to the true God! The God who loves everyone, always. He was teaching something entirely new.

Now, we know that Jesus was a Rabbi, a Jew who knew his Hebrew bible and the laws. He said, about his teachings and the laws: "Do not think that I have come to

abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Mat 5:17)

Jesus came to explain how his people, the Jews, had been taught wrongly about this God who loved them and how to live the life God intended.

One teaching he offered over and over again was in showing us how to care for people in need. He healed people of their infirmities and supplied their physical and spiritual needs; any people, all people, were his example to us.

What could be more loving than that?

But the Jews, they had a law. A law forbidding healing on the sabbath.⁵

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. 17In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” (John 5:17)

The woman in the synagogue never asked Jesus for healing, she was never asked to clarify or categorize her infirmity. She had spent 18 years learning to live with her problems and she was just a person in the background.

But Jesus saw her need - and healed her.

7 times Jesus healed people on the sabbath. Sometimes, as in this case, even in the Synagogue while he was teaching. He was of course called out for it, nearly every time.

Jesus re-interpreted the Jewish laws explaining God’s intent – even about the sabbath. On another occasion, on another Sabbath, detailed here in Mark 2,

Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain (and ate it). 24The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

⁵ Pseudo name: Empathetic Jesus Lover, *Teachings of the Bible*, September 14, 2016, <https://teachingsofthebible.wordpress.com/2016/09/14/jesus-7-miracles-he-performed-on-the-sabbath/> accessed 8/18/22. The Jews had a law that they were trying not to break regarding the Sabbath because earlier, they had disobeyed God by worshiping idols and God had put them in captivity for 70 years. So, anytime someone did work on the Sabbath, the Jews looked down on the person and they were taken to the Pharisees to be punished. Healing, carrying your bed, and walking more than a Sabbath’s day journey was forbidden.

25He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? 26In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

27Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23-28)

So, when we approach 2 teachings like these from Isaiah and Luke, what are we to make of them? What does our conscience do with the differences in what the scriptures tell us?

Well, here’s one interpretation that seems pretty clear to me and my conscience: God gave us His word as a love-letter, to help us live a God-filled life. The words of the Old Testament are true and so are the words of the new, in context and in time.

When we are faced with what appears to be conflicting readings, where does our conscience take us for understanding? In most cases I believe both teaching be can be right together.

Isaiah spoke for God saying “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please, on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, ¹⁴ then you will find your joy in the Lord.

Even Isaiah offered the people an opportunity to be with God in their worship. Isaiah’s “if-then” language served to include the people as actual moral agents in their relationship with God, participants in God’s life, agents in God’s desires for them.⁶

But the keepers of the law, the Jewish leaders, added law upon law to hedge in the Jewish people, interpreting word and intent and making God’s word more about laws than about people; more about laws than about God.

Then Jesus spoke for the whole world saying:

⁶Amy Oden, Commentary on Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12], <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-isaiah-581-9-10-12> , accessed 8/17/22.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

You are set free from your infirmity.

And, God is Love.

Jesus reinterpreted Isaiah to say: follow the Sabbath by honoring God through love. Care for people, heal their wounds, don't judge, and live at peace with everyone and God will then be honored.

He didn't change or violate Isaiah's words from God, he clarified their intent.

And for the Jewish leaders and for us, Jesus taught that loving people was more important than holding them to the rule and task or than judging them, and to instead leave the judging to God.

It is not hard to find parts of the Bible that seem objectionable to our conscience. It is not hard to find parts of the Bible that seem out of step with our Lord who walked the earth with us and said that to fulfill the entire law, we needed to only love God and love neighbor.

When placed in the balance against such a command, to love one another, my conscience tells me to stay within the circle of what Jesus has taught me to do.

So far as it depends upon us, our job is to love, to live at peace with everyone, to leave the judgement part of life to God.

So far as it depends on us, we are to honor the Lord, not by judging how people live, worship, or love, but by following our conscience in honoring the command to love God's people and to live peaceably with everyone.

May it be so,

Amen