



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
25 August 2019
Sermon: Sabbath Rest
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

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

Isaiah 58:9b-14

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.
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.
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.
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;^[a]
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. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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." 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? 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?" 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.

Confession time: if Christians, in contrast to our spiritual siblings of the Jewish faith, believe our Sabbath to be Sunday, then your staff at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church wantonly transgress the commandment every single week. When we actually sleep the night before, which of course, with sermon prep is not always the case, our work starts before we even wake up. I know we dream about Sunday morning on Saturday night, because soon after I get up a bit after 5:00am, I start receiving texts from Marcia and Samantha, Heather and Jeff, regarding issues that must have come to us in our dreams: announcements we need to cover, last minute changes to the service, and names to lift up in prayer. Our first staff meeting doesn't happen until 7:30 but well before that, this church is a beehive of activity: Cliff unlocking the church and setting up rooms; Heather checking in with the nursery and completing lessons; Jeff warming up; pastors finalizing prayers, practicing lines, printing sermons.

At 7:30 sharp, we begin with a moment of silence and prayer, asking the Spirit to guide us through the day. Then, we run through the bulletin one final time together. The preacher creates and others double-check a sound bulletin that details for our technicians when to turn

each of these microphones on at the right time. A second document goes to the ushers about the movements of the service. Then Marcia, Sam, Jeff, Heather and I walk through the services together, 8:15 and 10:15 – both of course very different from each other – making sure we know exactly who needs to be where and when:

- here's how the introit and prelude will go
- this person will lead the Call to worship
- these 2 will lead confession
- this youth is pouring – does the youth want to announce the peace or one of us?
- We practice faith sharing time with the children;
- we double check announcements
- we check in about the liturgist, sermon details, prayers

And then we are off! 2 Services; education for all ages; Fellowship time; choir practice; another pre-worship meeting at 9:55; countless, beautiful conversations with you all after and in-between services that range from the quotidian to the profound to the dire; meetings and more meetings after church. It is a unique joy and a privilege to be a worship leader in this place week after week. Unless you've worked on a church staff, I'm not sure you can really imagine it. Sunday is this flurry of activity and community, business and care, performance and reflection, learning and teaching. Very little of it can honestly be described as restful, and by 1 or 2:00 in the afternoon, very often, I'm so tired!

So you can imagine why, this week, I have been feeling empathy for the leader of the synagogue in our Gospel passage. He had to make sure everything was running smoothly in this place of worship on this holy day. He had his own first Century Jewish equivalent of worship

meetings, sound bulletins, education hours. Then, in walks Jesus, transgressing the day itself with this healing. Sabbath observance was a great point of contention in Jesus's day and the stakes were high. Exodus, Chapter 31, records God commanding that, "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you...Everyone who profanes [the sabbath] shall be put to death...Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death." So let's not be too quick to dismiss the synagogue leader's complaint here, when he says to the worshippers, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured." He's the one in charge of making sure everything was right and in place for proper Sabbath observance, for proper worship, which is no small task.

There's so much energy and expectation in his phrase about when work "ought to be done." You can tell that he's feeling the weight of other people's expectations about what is right and proper. And Jesus comes and messes everything up! The synagogue leader is so mad, so thrown off balance, he can't even talk to Jesus. He deflects. He repeats the expectations he lives under to the crowd. "There are six days on which work ought to be done." [pause]

[out to chancel, on a chair] "Let me show you the box," a young, tall and lanky college student told the shame researcher Brené Brown during an interview for a qualitative study. She describes their interaction:

I knew he was a tall guy, but when he stood up, it was clear that he was at least six foot four. He said, 'Imagine living like this,' as he crouched down and pretended that he was stuffed inside a small box. Still hunched over, he said...'You spend your life fighting to get out, throwing punches

*at the side of the box and hoping it will break. You always feel angry and you're always swinging. Or you just give up. You don't give a [expletive] about anything.*¹

When I picture the synagogue leader, I see a man boxed in, weighed down by religious expectations of his time, to the extent that he can't even see someone right in front of him who needs help, even on the Sabbath!

What is your box, the expectations that isolate you, that, perhaps, are telling you that you aren't enough, you don't measure up, or, you better walk this line perfectly or you won't be valuable? Is there a box especially made for today, or this week – that thing you *ought* to do, and you better do it perfectly. Or have you been trapped for longer, in a box, since your childhood, since your teenage years? Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”² It's that feeling, not just that we have done wrong, but that we are wrong. When she asks people what is shame, here are some of the things they say to her. Shame tells us we have to:

- Look perfect. Do perfect. Be perfect. Anything less than that is shaming.
- [Shame is] Being exposed – the flawed parts of yourself that you want to hide from everyone are revealed.
- Showing fear is shameful. You can't show fear. You can't be afraid – no matter what.
- [Men, in particular, tell her] Revealing any weakness is shaming. Basically, shame is weakness.³

¹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012), 93.

² *Ibid.*, 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 85-92.

The greatest insight I've learned reading Brown lately is the fact that everyone experiences shame.

She tells another story, a nightmare scenario really. She declined a speaking engagement and received an angry email from the man who was hosting the event. Rather than reply directly after being irritated by his reply, she decided to forward her response to a few confidants, just blowing off some steam, calling the angry man a few names, even using a few curse words, as we sometimes do when people get to us. But when she tried to email her friends, she hit the reply button rather than forward, so her angry, not-so-positive rant went right back to the angry man. And he pounced on it, and told her all the things she suspected about for herself. Of course, Brené Brown is just like the rest of us; she has insecurities. Even with her great success, she worries that she's not up to the task, or that she's somehow not authentic, that she doesn't live into the positive, open-minded, holistic messages of her books. And the angry emailer went straight for her shame: "I knew it," he wrote, "you hypocrite. You're not the wholehearted person you play in your books. You're just a horrible person." Brown says that time slowed down; her mouth got dry and she couldn't swallow. She had to catch her breath, and when she did, she just whispered, "Pain, pain, pain, pain pain..."⁴

Reading about Brown voicing this shame, I hear an echo of the synagogue leader, "There are six days on which work ought to be done." "Ought to be done." Because we are expected to keep this Sabbath day holy. They tell me, this is what I have to do to keep it holy.

⁴ Ibid., 78-80.

New Testament and Jewish scholars today agree, Jesus's argument is correct about proper Sabbath observance.⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, the Sabbath itself is a day of remembrance of God's liberation. In Deut. 5, when God gives the 10 Commandments, the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is followed by these words: "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." Sabbath rest is tied to liberation. How strange it is, then, that the laws around Sabbath could have been twisted to such an extent that they would have prevented the liberation this woman experienced by Jesus's healing. You see, it is not that rules, laws and expectations are inherently bad, but rather that they have a tendency to become toxic for us. When they cut us off from others and from ourselves, that is toxicity.

And yet, this is so often how religion works on us, how church functions for us. We worship a live-giving God of liberation, yet so often religion gets twisted, to the extent that God seems to demand conformity and submission. God gets twisted into becoming our source of shame, and churches become places where you are reminded over and over that you ought to be better, that you ought to be different, that you're not acceptable as who you are: the church's homophobia, the church's sexism, the church's racism, the church's hypocritical infatuation with its own power and orthodoxy have all worked in this way.

⁵ See Elizabeth Caldwell's commentary on the passage in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 3.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 265-266; Amy Jill-Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 32.

For the longest time, I wrestled with my call to church ministry precisely because of such messages. I thought, if I was going to be a pastor then I would have to hide part of myself, that I couldn't say what I really thought, that I couldn't share fully my doubts, my politics, my sarcasm with you. I felt that I would always have to hold you at a distance. And I wonder, if at some level, some of you feel that way about church, or about God. Or, perhaps you are like me, perhaps you came to Grace Covenant precisely because it feels like a place where you can be whoever you really are, and find love here, and find acceptance here.

As a church body, we hope you experience a sense of peace, rather than shaming expectation, here, or, if not here, then somewhere else in your life. Because you are created by a God who accepts you, and a savior who redeems you, not so that we can live some lawless, self-indulgent, hedonistic life, but rather so that we can work in the name of the God of love, justice, and abundance from a place of authenticity, from a place of passion rather than shame. I ask you this morning, what box are you living in? Is it time to take a break from those walls, and find rest and peace and Sabbath joy in God? Amen.