

The Blessings of an Active Church Life

Isaiah 58:9b-14
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First Presbyterian Church
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My brother, Ron, was recently talking with the daughter of his late-fiancé who passed away about 7 years ago. The daughter, Heather, was in her 20s when her mom died after a long battle with drug addiction, and Ron never missed a beat being there for her as if he were her own father. Heather's actual father was long out of the picture and, not only that, but both her grandparents died the same year as her mom. So, she really didn't have any "family" except for Ron, no other positive father figure.

Fast forward to today. Heather and Ron were recently celebrating her 30th birthday when she asked if she could share something with him. She said she was ready to reclaim her life and move beyond her past.

To do this – to reclaim her life – Heather decided to change her name to Star, as a reflection of our connection to all creation. And not only that, but she told Ron she changed her last name, also, to Carlson. She legal changed her name to Carlson.

"... You shall raise up the foundations of many generations," says Isaiah. "You shall be called the repairer of the breach." There is no greater calling in life than to be among those repairing the breach between God and this hurting world of ours, creating a foundation for generations to come. This is what we strive to be and to do as a church, as a community of faith. And it's what the nation of Israel was called to be and to do as the people of God.

In our Old Testament lesson, the Prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people who had lost their way when it came to claiming and enjoying the promises of God. This happened after a period of peace and prosperity that saw the upper class grow more and more wealthy while everyone else struggled just to get by. Their religious life suffered as they lost sight of God and focused more and more on daily distractions and immediate gratification. And then there was all the social injustice – people trying to get over on one another instead of finding a way forward for all.

As Christopher Seitz puts it in The New Interpreter's Bible commentary, "The prophet (Isaiah) is condemning false righteousness (58:2) among a people for whom there is the hope and possibility of true righteousness."¹ In other words, people were just going through the motions when it came to their relationship with God, and then they wondered why things weren't getting any better.

¹ NIB Commentary, Isaiah, p 521.

Just as the Israelites struggled with this back then, we struggle with it today. Religious practices for so many people have fallen to the wayside. And too many people don't take the time and effort to help someone who's down.

It's like the joke I heard recently on the podcast Smartless, told by the Canadian actor Will Arnett. There are "two lobster fishermen," says Arnett, "one Canadian and one American.... The American ... says to the Canadian, 'Hey, I notice you don't have a lid on your lobster pot there, boy. Aren't you worried that your lobsters are going to get out?' The Canadian says, 'No these are Canadian lobsters. If one of them tries to get out, the others will pull him back down.' "That's Canada," says Arnett.² And sadly, that's humanity these days – everyone struggling so much that we end up pulling each other down, rather than finding a way to build each other up.

Seitz puts it this way, saying, "People feel that God has let them down. It is easier to blame God and neighbor than to (take) a deeper, more painful look at our own shortcomings...." We become hopeless, wondering if anything will ever change for the better. And we certainly don't see how we could make any difference.

And that's when Isaiah comes in. Isaiah is certain that we can make a difference, that things can get better. And he has God's assurance to back him up. Giving voice to the word of God, Isaiah says, "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."

Seitz calls this God's decision to bring salvation and not condemnation upon those whom he loves, both the people of ancient Israel and the faithful of our day. But there is an "if" in there. If we lift each other up, if we quit blaming each other and calling each other names, then your light shall shine in the darkness and your sadness become joy.

The problem with this is we think we have to do all the work, we have to be the ones to make God's vision a reality. Not so! Our responsibility is simply to listen to what God asks of us and do it. "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; 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."

It's pretty simple, folks. Keep the Sabbath holy – take time for God and for God alone – and God will see to it that all the rest falls into place.

² Smartless podcast, "Tina Fey," Wondery, May 10, 2021.

Do you believe that? Do you believe it could be that simple? That if we and all people made the effort to make church life a priority at least one day out of seven, then this world would be a much better place?

Yes, I think we all believe. But, are we willing to act on it. Are we willing to make weekly church attendance a priority again, for us and for our community? It's a tough question.

I mean, it's easy to say we go to church – most weeks; that we're good people – most of the time. But we know that for too many people, a regular Sabbath observance has become optional. Now, of course, some people are at work or taking care of family, and we know that. But still, we leave here wondering why more people aren't in church. And yet, we have this message from God telling us that it could make all the difference in the world, if they were. Is that a message we're willing to share, that church matters? Because God say so?

If we lift each other up and quit blaming each other, and instead, focus on blessing the lives of others, Isaiah says, "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."

This is God offering us guidance, abundance, strength, and new life for generations to come. What a blessing it is to hear the promises of the Lord! What a miracle it is to believe them, act on them, and see them come true – people gathering around the word of God, getting their life out of it, being energized for the days ahead, and marveling at how God blesses their lives in ways they could never imagine. Amazing.

Homecoming Sunday is just three weeks away. You've been given the message today that church life is important, that God will bless the lives of those who keep his Sabbath holy and through them bless the whole world.

Let us all, in the next three weeks, find a way to put that message into action. Let us find a way to share news of Homecoming Sunday with those we'd like to see here on Sept. 11. And let us go forth knowing that church life is not all about us, but rather, it's about God and neighbor, and what God hopes to accomplish this day, this week, this month through you, through us, just because we're here. Go forth and share that message. Amen.

In this week's prayer, we lift up students and teachers ahead of the new school year. God, our teacher, who helps us to understand the world around us, thank you for the privilege of education. In a year of lingering uncertainty and new routines, we recognize the gift of learning and the gift of teaching. You have blessed our communities with teachers who take new skills and concepts and pass them along to each new class of young people.

God, you came as a child to show us how to be fully human, to show us how to be children of God. You have given our children minds that grow and develop in unique ways, at unique speeds, and we are astounded by that miracle.

You speak to us through the words, actions, play, and feelings of children. You call us to listen to the Spirit speaking through our young siblings in Christ.

We celebrate the beginning of this school year and ask your blessings upon the children, the educators, and the families who support them.

But in this celebration of education and learning, we do not forget there are children and families and teachers who do not have the resources they need.

Today, we remember those who are beginning school this year: those who have what they need to learn and grow in safety, and those who lack supplies, teachers, safe buildings, and accommodations for all needs and abilities.

We come to worship together, to lift up our young people and all those who care for them and teach them.

We come, also, in prayer at this time, asking your healing touch and comforting presence for those who are struggling with illness and disease, physical limitations, grief and sorrow.

We pray all this in the name of our Great Teacher, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.