

Today's readings provide us with two examples of scolding about violations of the Sabbath. They exist in interesting contrast to one another.

First, Isaiah, on behalf of God, is berating the Hebrew people, and especially their leadership, for failing to honor the Sabbath, for "trampling the sabbath, pursuing your own interests on my holy day." The Sabbath, it seems, is a day to pursue God's interests rather than our own. What set the prophet on his tirade was the way people were treating one another, specifically making one another beasts of burden, pointing accusatory fingers, and speaking evil. As we heard recently from a totally different part of Isaiah, it seems that failing to treat one another with justice and kindness completely invalidates our spiritual practices. We can right our relationship with God by feeding the hungry and caring for the afflicted as we cease those other evil practices. Isaiah says quite explicitly that honoring the Sabbath and delighting in God can only happen in this context.

One interesting thought that came to me from this passage was that there is such a thing as Sabbath business. It is true that we are told to have this as a day of rest, a time out with God and our own souls. We are told to lay aside our own busy-ness, the pursuit of our own selfish ends. But we are also told to be about God's business. The Sabbath is often referred to as 'the Lord's day'. This is the day when our energies should be spent on God's priorities. Like many people I regard the best summary of God's priorities for our lives to be found in the prophet Micah: "to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God." (*Micah 6:8*)

Isaiah (and God) are upset because people are doing their own selfish business on the Sabbath, and indeed failing to live out God's priorities in any part of their lives.

What causes the upset in Luke? Again we find the Hebrew people at worship, gathered together studying Torah, saying prayers. That certainly appears to be the appropriate, traditional use of Sabbath time. But Jesus notices a woman who is suffering, unable to stand upright. So he heals her.

The religious leader in charge of the synagogue was upset with Jesus for doing 'work' and on the woman for being healed. To him this appeared to be activity appropriate for ordinary days, not for God's day. But Jesus points out the hypocrisy of people who would care for their beasts of burden, essential to their own business activities, on the Sabbath, but would deny help to a person in need. They think they are piously avoiding any business on the holy day, but in fact, just like the people in Isaiah's time, they are looking after their own personal interests, not God's.

If the Sabbath is the day for God's business, then it would seem the most appropriate day for healing. What happens as soon as Jesus heals the woman? She stands up and starts praising God. As is usual with Jesus, this healing includes a deepening of her relationship with God, a healing of her spirit as well as her body. This sounds like Sabbath business, God's business.

It is common today to think and talk about the idea of Sabbath time. It is approached in two distinctive ways: one seeks to find out how best to access the spiritual riches of Sabbath observance, to make it a time for spiritual growth; the other seeks to take advantage of the knowledge about the rhythm of life that makes people most productive in order to enhance work.

The latter approach has given us coffee breaks, lunch breaks, and weekends off, not because it is good for the individuals, but because it makes it possible to get the most profit out of each individual's labor. The latter approach falls right in with what Isaiah was complaining about: using God's Sabbath 'for the pursuit of their own ends'.

Jesus reminds us of the first approach, where Sabbath and Sabbath time are all about enhancing our connection with God and God's priorities. Priorities like healing and prayer and praise. The Luke story reminds us that Sabbath time includes being aware of the people around us, their needs and their journeys, not merely turning inward to focus on our own.

So our Sabbath time can include work, like cooking for people who are hungry, cleaning the yard of our infirm neighbor, listening to lonely people in assisted living. It can also include planning and organizing to make the world more just, to lessen oppression of any sort. If it is kingdom work, that is work that moves the world (or even a tiny part of it) closer to the reality of God's perfect Shalom, then it is God's work and it is Sabbath work.

Sabbath time, of course, also includes community, especially worship in community, which has always been part of the Sabbath tradition since the beginning. Our relationships with God and one another are deeply connected, and are the heart of our spiritual lives, to be nurtured on the Sabbath. When we gather for worship, we strengthen all of those connections, and build something to which other people can come for nurture and growth.

Sabbath time can also include alone time, time to recollect, to pray, to read, to rest, to do what needs doing for healing our own inner selves from the wear and tear of our week.

I have always been impressed by the fact that God asks more of our time than of our money. We often strain under the idea that a full tenth of our monetary resources, our harvests and gains, are meant to be dedicated to God and God's business. But it is less common to think about the fact that God wants a seventh of our time – quite a bit more than a tenth. This could

seem like a burden, if we think of Sabbath time as time in which I cannot do any of ‘my own business’, cannot do anything of my own choosing.

But there is a different way to think about it. If Sabbath time is time spent building the Kingdom, making the world more loving and just, and spent developing our spiritual lives, that is deepening our connections with God, the world, and one another, then a mere seventh of our time does not seem to be enough. It seems to me that a reasonable goal of life would be to keep expanding the Sabbath portion of our lives, until they are entirely Sabbath, never including anything that is not according to God’s will for us, always moving us closer to God, making us better servants.

This week I learned that we have a L’Arche community in Portland. I first learned about these communities in reading Henri Nouwen’s books. That favorite priest and writer spent many years living in a L’Arche community with individuals having significant mental impairments. He loved the residents so much and learned so much from them, that I have always found his descriptions of their life together truly inspiring. This kind of life, where people choose to live in community, in service to those in need, always recognizing each individual as a unique child of God, seems to me to represent living one’s entire life in Sabbath time.

I am excited to know that there is such a community in our area and hope that some of us may find ways to be involved with it, to bring that full time Sabbath living closer to our own lives.

The more of our time is truly Sabbath time, the closer we come to that wonderful description in Hebrews, “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...”

Sabbath time is God’s time, our time to be with God and to be about God’s business in the world. May every day be Sabbath for us.