

“Will We Welcome Release, Growth, and Leaven?”

Friends, in person and at a physical distance, the Spirit of God has gathered us together on this eleventh of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. We have come to praise God, notice our longings, listen for a fresh Word of Love, and respond with our lives. As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, we will wonder individually and together about welcoming release, growth and leaven.

Let us pray. God within each of us and connecting us as community; soften our spirits now and open our minds this morning. Lead us toward hearing and responding to your call of your Spirit in our lives. And as your holy, loving Spirit embraces us in this time and in this space, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Moments ago, we heard Mary Maren ready powerful teachings from Jesus about release, growth and yeast (or leaven). Jesus named these markers of the here-and-now kingdom of God that we can co-create: release, growth, leaven. Jesus had gathered on the Sabbath with fellow devout Jews to worship God through song, silence, and the reading and discussion of sacred scriptures. In the Jewish tradition, Sabbath is celebrated from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, marking from our common creation story the culmination of God’s creative work in time dedicated to rest and renewal.

The same Spirit that drew Jesus to gather with friends at a local synagogue as part of their Sabbath ritual has also drawn us together two millennia later as part of our weekly ritual of worship. I appreciate how the two practices complement one another – Jews celebrating the Sabbath as a time for spiritual rest, renewal, and ever deepening faith and Christians celebrating Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week as a time of spiritual nourishment for bursting forth into the coming week of work and play.

We will circle back to the gospel reading in a few moments. First, let's notice how the reading from Hebrew scriptures speaks of sabbath release. Isaiah and Jesus seem to be in conversation with one another across an expanse of 600 years and both can inform our living today. In meditating on today's words from Isaiah, I found it most fruitful to study it backward, from end to beginning.

As we hear again the thirteenth verse, let's each wonder: **how do I live Sabbath time most effectively – when, where, with whom, how do I rest, renew and move toward deeper faith?** We heard:

*“If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath
and doing business on the holy day,
if you call the Sabbath delightful
and the day sacred to God honorable,
if you honor it by not pursuing your own ways,
seeking your own pleasure,
or speaking your own words,
then will you find your happiness in God” (Isa 58: 13)*

Do you set aside time to refrain from trampling, doing business, seeking and speaking. Do you find yourself often enough in a Sabbath way of being carried, playing, resting, and listening? How do you live Sabbath time most effectively?

As we hear again the twelfth verse, let's each wonder: **do I draw upon my Sabbath awareness of my deeply rooted identity as beloved of God when attempting to participate in repair and restoration in my community?** We heard:

*“You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
and build upon age-old foundations.
You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
and Restorer of Ruined Neighborhoods.” (Isa 58: 12)*

Do you draw upon a deeply rooted Sabbath awareness that you are beloved when you attempt to participate in repair and restoration in our community?

As we hear again the eleventh verse, let's each wonder: **when I feel weary in my spirit, mind or body; what are my sources of relief, strength and sustenance?**

*"God will always guide you,
giving relief in desert places.
God will give strength to your bones
and you will be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never run dry." (Isa 58: 11)*

Friends, when you are weary, do you follow the Spirit's leading to sources that will truly replenish you with relief, strength and sustenance?

And as we hear again the ninth and tenth verses, let's each wonder: **do I consistently act in ways whereby I sense the light of God's love shining through me?**

*"Cry, and God will answer;
call, and God will say, 'I am here'—
provided you remove from your midst
all oppression, finger pointing, and malicious talk!
If you give yourself to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your shadows will become like noon." (Isa 58: 9-10)*

Do you remove oppressive dynamics such as finger pointing and gossip from your personal relationships? Do you give of your time, energy and other resources to collaborate in satisfying needs in the community?

Only by co-creating caring environments are we likely to hear God (that is, Love) sigh and whisper, 'I am here.'

Today's gospel reading opens with eyes focused on a woman in the gathered community who had a chronic physical illness. We do not necessarily know that she sought healing from her condition. An insidious aspect of ableism can be an assumption that another is broken and needs fixing. We tend to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt, assuming only loving intentions and sensitivity to her needs. The story tells us that the woman did experience physical healing from Jesus' touch and that she expressed gratitude to God.

As the encounter between Jesus and the woman unfolded, we read that the head of the synagogue felt indignant. Indignation means feeling affronted – angry or annoyed about something perceived to be unfair or unworthy. The religious leader expressed this: *"There are six days for working. Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath."* The head of the synagogue demonstrated faithful discipline in his longing to honor and respect the restful rhythms of Sabbath.

We then heard, *"Jesus said in reply '...Shouldn't she have been released from her shackles on the Sabbath?'"* Release from oppression or pain of any kind may be a prerequisite to honoring true Sabbath.

Later in the reading, we heard, *Jesus continued, "What does the kingdom of God resemble? To what will I liken it? It's like a mustard seed which a gardener took and planted in the garden. It grew and became a large shrub, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."* I wonder, where are you planting even a small seed of loving compassion in an intentional way – that it might grow and spread the shade and shelter of the love of God?

And finally, we hear Jesus say, *"To what will I compare the kingdom of God? It's like the yeast which a baker added to three measures of flour and kneaded until*

the whole ball of dough began to rise.” I have been participating for four years in a leadership program for young UCC clergy who are dedicated to being local church pastors. It is called Next Generation Leadership Initiative, and one of the touchstone refrains in our program is “Be the leaven.” We are encouraged as pastors to encourage all of our partners in ministry to consider being leaven – yeast in the dough of community. I wonder, where are you offering yourself as an instrument for the Spirit of God to act like leaven toward the baking of love and justice into the dough of our community?

Let’s go forth from this hour to plant small seeds of love and justice and to be leaven of the same in the community. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Isaiah 58: 9-14, Luke 13: 10-21