

The Strong Heart of Delighters

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Today we are going to begin by talking about our hearts. Not our spiritual hearts, but our blood pumping hearts. Take your first two fingers and place them on either your carotid artery in your neck or your radial artery on your wrist and see if you can feel your heartbeat? I'm going to give everyone just a moment to see if you can find it. Once you do, feel for the rhythm of it, the way it pumps and then rests, pumps and then rests. Feel it? *The heart is an amazing organ. When the heart contracts, that work is called systole, it's when it pushes the blood out and into the rest of our body. After the heart pumps, it relaxes. That rest is called diastole, and it's when the heart refills with blood, soaking in necessary oxygen. That pause is essential! If it never rested, it could never refill. In fact, the heart lives because it stops working for a fraction of every beat. Even during the most intense exercise, the heart can only continue to function if it continually stops to be refilled.

One of the central themes in today's readings is the Sabbath. It's a common theme throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. And the reason it comes up so often is because the people of God have struggled with it since its inception.

The sabbath command was **first** given to Moses at Mount Sinai. It is recorded in Exodus after the Hebrew slaves had been liberated from Egypt. It states "Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath **to** the Lord your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you." The word sabbath comes from the Hebrew word that means to cease or rest because on the seventh day, God ceased from the work of creation. But, as time went on,

the command was also always linked back to the Hebrew's deliverance from slavery, since that was when the command was originally given.

The details in the command are a bit sparse, but we can gather a few things. First, since God did this immediately after creation, God's rest likely took the form of enjoyment of the work that had just been accomplished, indicating that we too should stop and appreciate our labor. Additionally, when the command was given again later, it included the expectation that the Israelites would gather in worship and together bring their offerings. This makes sense since the law specified that ALL people and beasts in the whole land were to participate. Obedience to the sabbath meant the community were responsible for making it possible for everyone to rest and worship. Finally, as seen in the Isaiah reading, they were instructed to delight in this cessation of work. It was meant to be a gift, not a burden. Which made sense for a group of exhausted and newly liberated slaves. But our Isaiah reading was given to the people nearly eight centuries after these people had been freed. By that time, the people were no longer desperate for release from the toil of slavery. In fact, the powerful among them had turned their prosperity into a means of basically enslaving the marginalized. They pursued their own goals, resenting the restrictions of the sabbath, and failed to provide it as a gift for those didn't have the freedom to rest from their labors.

When we get to the New Testament and see Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, he was bringing the gift back to those who could not access it on their own. It was no accident that so many of Jesus' healings happened on the sabbath. Jesus was expressing an eschatological hope, a reality that exists beyond the visible world. Since the original command was linked with creation, Jesus linked the sabbath with our recreation. To uphold the sabbath, Jesus followers would live as new creations. And since the original command was also linked with the release from slavery, Jesus was linking the sabbath with liberation. Jesus' followers would uphold the sabbath by living freed from the yoke of slavery to sin, thereby becoming a means of liberation for all who are bound in suffering.

Don't get me wrong, Jesus never told his followers to stop practicing the sabbath in the way they had been taught. But he was offering them a new way to understand the priorities of God and a fuller way to live into God's dream for their sabbath practice. In today's account, rather than declaring a healing, Jesus pronounces freedom. Then, when he places his hands on the woman, a woman who had spent a lifetime bent over and unable to look into the eyes of others, she stands upright. Jesus restored her dignity, her equality, her ability to participate with God and others. And immediately...she began praising God, and then the crowd joined. Jesus gathered people together, declared freedom, empowered those who lacked their own ability to participate as equal, and then worshiped God together with them. When we hear about the sabbath, this vignette ought to be what comes to mind.

But some of us are seeking healing and have not yet received it in the way we want. For the grieving, the suffering, and the lonely, sometimes it feels like there is no reason to praise and no rest. Even when we cease labor, we cannot escape our heartache. Which is when this passage in Hebrews is helpful! We are pictured at the foot of Mount Zion, the eternal city. He calls us "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven". In the ancient world, the firstborn was the one who received the entire inheritance for the family. In God's kingdom we all claim that inheritance with Christ together. The holy city is the eternal sabbath. We do not always experience the blessings and benefits of the eternal kingdom in this life. But, for those who live the priorities of the sabbath, we are "receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken". Even when we don't feel it, we take solace in our participation with an assembly beyond our imagination. Together with those who have gone before us, we choose to worship, even through our tears.

Like so many things, the practice of giving thanks, the choice to praise God even when life doesn't seem to offer many concrete reasons for thankfulness, is an avenue into experiencing it. Chicken or egg? Sometimes we praise because life feels awesome. Sometimes we praise because, like the Psalmist says, we need to remember when life

was awesome, or the promises God offers to one day restore us fully into awesomeness. The praising itself, when done from an authentic and humble heart, does transform the way we experience our experiences.

If we want to be sabbath people, people who come together to lift one another up and praise God together, it won't happen on its own. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but dissatisfaction and discontent are the natural human baseline. Like it or not, we come pre-wired with a negativity bias. Be honest, you know what I mean! Humans feel and remember the bad things far more than the good. It's a fact. Add to that, we live in a consumerist culture that constantly feeds our dissatisfaction. Praise does not come naturally to us. Being thankful is a choice. And, based on the number of times our forebearers were scolded for failing to live up to this sabbath ideal, we can understand that the negativity bias has been troublesome for a long time. Gratitude, therefore, is one of the most valuable tools humans have to overcome dissatisfaction. The practice of the sabbath reminds us to be grateful, to stop long enough to notice God's gifts, and to find support with others when being thankful is difficult. Gratitude is a choice; a choice that safeguards our rest.

Like the rhythm of a physical heartbeat, our spiritual hearts require regular rest to function. Ceasing work provides the time we need to lift our eyes up from the grind of regular tasks to see God's goodness for ourselves and to notice those around us who may need our help to join us in rest and worship. If we aren't experiencing the joy God provided for us, not feeling liberated and re-created, maybe it's because we need to reclaim the sabbath. Perhaps we need to find ways to privilege rest and thankfulness in our weekly schedules.

In Isaiah's message, God says of those who uphold the sabbath, "you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth". May we be a people whose hearts are made strong from delighting in God.