

19.3.31

“Sabbath as Resistance to Exclusivism”

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Isaiah 56:3-8

This morning we continue on in our Lenten study of Sabbath. The first week we considered the biblical call to Sabbath-keeping generally. The week before last, we talked about Sabbath as Resistance to Anxiety, then last week Sabbath as Resistance to Coercion. Next week we’ll talk about Sabbath as Resistance to Multi-Tasking (For those like me who generally have 8 or more tabs open on your browser - You’ll want come back for that!) Today - we’re talking about *Sabbath as Resistance to Exclusivism*.

Over the course of our study, we’ve traced the history of Sabbath from its first-mention in the Creation narrative, to the role it played as God called the Hebrew people out of bondage in Egypt, and into Exodus in the wilderness, then finally, into the Promised Land - We’ve seen the theological vision of Sabbath develop over time, from the writings of Genesis, through Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Today we examine Sabbath through the lens of the prophet Isaiah.

In doing so, we are skipping over the history of the judges, and Israel’s first kings: King Saul, King David, and King Solomon and the rise of the Temple System... the rise of the united and divided kingdoms, we’re skipping over all of that history - that time of prosperity in which Moses warned it is so easy to fall into amnesia about the journey from being “no people” to becoming “God’s people” - to a period when the people are reminded of their need for God again.

I’m speaking of the period the time of exile - when Israel was conquered first by the Assyrians, then the Persians. And during this time, people were carted off to Babylon in three, and possibly many more, waves of *forced-migration*. Like the brain-drain visited on so many “Rust-Belt” towns across America, they lost their best and brightest first, then their tradespeople, and finally the exile took anyone who could still work. They lost their land, they lost their places of home and worship - but YHWH went with them into the exile.

But in exile - their position in relationship to the divine and one another is changed again. They have been transplanted into a new culture - new government - a new religious landscape - one that is often at odds with them. And finding themselves no longer on top - they begin to worry - and chief among their worries - is the danger of *assimilation*. It was a danger of losing their sense of identity - language, culture, traditions, faith. Their traditions, practices, rituals take on new meaning for them.

If you remember the story of Daniel - the one who got thrown into the Lion's den - well, his crime was that he would not bow to the King, or pray to the king - but only to YHWH. In another story we read that he and his friends, went on a hunger strike - refusing to eat the meat that had been sacrificed to idols - only permitting themselves to eat vegetables, instead. They resisted the Empire by *keeping Sabbath alive* while living in a new place, and under Empire.

While, Daniel was probably written after most Israelites had returned from exile (It's the kind of story you can only tell after liberation.) The prophet/poet Isaiah is thought to have been writing during, and towards the end of the exile. At that point, there was great concern that the people keep the religious traditions alive, while living as strangers in a strange land. It's not unlike how some Muslim women in America today describe their decision to wear a head covering. It's seen as an act of faithfulness to God, and an act of resistance to the forces of assimilation. It recalls a that scene from Fiddler on the Roof, where the Jewish family lights Shabbat candles and sings "Sunrise, Sunset" in the midst of the Czar's Russia. In such a trans-cultural context - holding onto our religious traditions becomes all-important.

For the readers of Isaiah, living in exile, keeping Sabbath, was resistance. Just surviving in this new reality meant making accommodations, compromises. And when their exile was over, and some were allowed to return, think about how it must have been to return. Some have intermarried. Some have forgotten their religious heritage, and adopted foreign customs and religious practices. Some have been a part of the system of oppression. *All are changed.* And suddenly it becomes very important to define who belongs in the community, and in contrast, who does not. For over the generations of living as a stranger in a strange land - assimilation happens, whether we chose it or not. And when it happens, membership is harder to define than it once was. Because people don't fit into our neat and tidy boxes. Isaiah contemplates the Almighty's answer the question of "Who belongs?" - And you know what the answer is? "***My house... shall be called a house of prayer.... for all peoples.***"

Consider how, in the span of a few generations, the Hebrew people had been transformed from "no people" - a marginalized, objectionable people -- to "this people" ? -- an identifiable, intentional community called "Israel." Consider what had to happen for that identity to be formed. Wars were fought. Land was taken. Purity laws were created and enforced. Someone had to decide on the definition of "US" and to do so, they created a "THEM." And the people systematized a way of deciding who is in and who is out. And *we* are still doing that today.

In the last several sections of our UCC 101 Class - and sometimes in Confirmation - I've shared the concept of a "Bounded Set" versus a "Centered Set" concept of membership. In the first - you draw a circle - deciding what others have to be, do, think, say, *or believe* to be "in" the circle - leaving everyone else outside. History is full of Creeds, Catechisms, and Statements of

Faith, which are aimed at determining orthodoxy, which is just another way of saying who is “in” and who is “out.” Thankfully, we don’t execute many heretics these days. Nevertheless, in so many of our churches, the boundary line is clear.

In contrast, the centered-set is more difficult to define or enforce. It’s more mirky. It’s the idea that there are few if any restrictions on belief, action, identity. The only requirement is the desire to journey along with one another in common purpose. You may have noticed, in the UCC, we use the language of journey frequently. That’s because we are not a creedal church. Yes, we have a statement of faith, which you can find it in the back of your hymnal - but it is understood as a testimony of faith, and not a test of faith. It’s agreement to journey together, which defines, for us, who belongs and who does not.

AND - as nice as that sounds, in practice, even non-creedal churches like ours draw lines. Forming a sense of group identity requires that we have some commonalities and some boundaries. What I hope for, what I pray for, is that our lines are permeable. For whenever we draw lines between us and another person - there are sacrifices which have to be made. We sacrifice our sameness, common humanity, our openness to different ways of being, and the opportunity for a more diverse community.

As the Israelites began returning exile in Babylon, the issue of membership and boundaries became important once again. They had very nearly lost their identity to assimilation. Now they had a chance to restore it. The question is, where to draw the line? If you draw it too wide, it’s almost meaningless - and might in fact undermine your common cause. If you draw it too narrow, you risk excluding those who really do belong, but for whatever reason, don’t fit the overly-narrow parameters you’ve laid out. And, the all important question - who gets to decide where to draw the line?

There were several different groups in conversation in the composition of the scriptures. One of the groups within Israel - the Priestly writers - think Leviticus - *left out* those who were physically, sexually, or in other ways non-conforming - in particular - those who were eunuchs. Did you catch their mention in the text from Isaiah? Did that seem like a surprising inclusion? Well, according to Leviticus 22, they didn’t belong because they were considered imperfect, damaged, and they were not welcomed in God’s House - which incidentally, had a series of boundaries. The outermost boundary was open - to foreigners, women, children, but only men - who were physically intact - could go into the inner courts, and beyond that only male priests. But here, the prophet includes the eunuch, and intentionally affirms them and their faith. Calls them blessed.

Incidentally, the reason Jesus got so angry as to overturn the money-changers tables was that the outer-court - supposed to be a place for worship for all people - and not just some - was turned into a place of commerce and exploitation - instead of welcome and worship. That is why he kicked over the money-changers things and declared, *“My house shall be a house of prayer for all people.”*

For Isaiah - All that's required of the eunuch to be considered inside the circle is that they honor the Sabbath - and keep the covenant - that they are on the same journey of faith. Consider the prophetic witness of Isaiah seeing this group, and naming them as within God's circle of blessing. It must have been a little bit like us celebrating today as *International Trans Visibility Day* - which happens to be March 31st. It means something to make the effort to say to our Trans siblings, “We see you. You are loved. You are welcome here. We'll stand by you.” That kind of inclusion and affirmation is incredibly powerful, because, sadly, it is a historical anomaly. Historically, churches and other religious groups have not always been as inclusive of all people. We've excluded people from leadership and membership because of their gender, sexual-orientation, identity, and marital status. And, though it might be less overt, we've excluded people based on their race and ethnicity, language and culture.

But, as we read in the second half of our text, Isaiah speaks of foreigners - *who join themselves to the Lord, who minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and be his servants, all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant - I will bring them to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them.*

To the poet prophet - the keeping of the Sabbath, and the covenant, are what's important. There is no line based on gender, race, ethnicity, or language. Sabbath - is for all - as we've read in past weeks. Male, Female. Queer and Questioning. Whatever language you speak. Whatever name you pray in. The God of Sabbath is an inclusive God.

But, as human beings, we like our dividing lines to be clear, don't we? And the impulse to build walls, and enforce boundaries, is all-too clear in our world today. And it's those who are on the margins who are most vulnerable.

Noel Anderson, of the Church World Service reports that,

*“There is an unprecedented 68 million people, including 25 million refugees¹, (who) have been forced from their homes around the world. **This is the worst refugee crisis in***

¹ According to UNHCR's latest statistics, there are approximately 25.4 million refugees in the world. US State Department - Accessed 3.25.2019

history. And while global need at its highest, the current administration has dismantled the refugee resettlement program and reversed our nation's history as a world leader in refugee protection. Over the last two years, the Trump administration has slashed the refugee program by 75% resulting in the lowest refugee arrivals in history, and forcing some resettlement agencies to close their doors. The administration set a new record-low refugee admissions goal for fiscal year 2019 at 30,000, and what's worse, we are only on [track](#) to resettle 21,000 refugees this year - not even meeting this low goal.”²

Boundary building, and maintaining - always requires sacrifices - and creates casualties. It's so easy to draw a line upon the map, and forget that it crosses natural boundaries in unnatural ways. Ever try building a wall over water? Or a desert? Or, ever try to establish a boundary about who belongs and who doesn't? It almost always brings harms to someone, or something in God's beautiful creation. Most of us live lives that are too complex to be defined by the narrow boundaries society has made for us.

For the Prophet, Isaiah, what *counts* is the fruit - the outcomes of our lives, not our pedigrees. The Good News is God has gathered us, and is gathering still... There is more light yet to be revealed, so let us draw the circle wide. Let us draw it wider still. Amen.

² Noel Anderson, Church World Service - Accessed 3/31/2019 - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o-yjFRDx9hNXXK2K1HpB7ZspapWf8aT_VNPJaaFC1Jmo/edit