

11th Sunday after Pentecost August 21 2022

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17

For much of our history as a nation, we have valued education. There were free public schools as early as the 1600's. These schools taught the basics to children such that they could improve their own position in society and support the growing colonies. The idea of educating children to reach their full potential and be active in promoting and participating in a democratic society began in the late 1800s and became widespread by the 1930s. Part of the American ideal is that we can- through education, hard work, and persistence- make a better life for ourselves. Individually and collectively.

Public schools are an investment in our children and our nation, our future. Yet, there is more happening there than book learning. We have found out over these past two years how vital the in person social interaction and support are. We also know that just attending school, going to classes, even getting good grades is not enough. You need to then apply those things that you learn for the benefit of that education to fall upon you and society.

Each of these components of education in our public schools is necessary- assembling in person, receiving the education that is offered both in the curriculum and the social interactions- the living in that assembly, and actually making use of that education in your daily life and your life as a citizen. All three are necessary if the benefit of that education is to become evident in both the individual and for society.

Both our reading from Isaiah and Jesus in our reading from Luke point to a similar necessity related to our being church together- assembled in the flesh, receiving the Word in worship and daily devotions and study, and the living out of that faith in our daily lives. The communal life we share in assembly, the reception of the Word through our worship and study as well as each other, and actually living out that faith in our daily life. All three are essential for the full benefit of our faith to become evident.

We have learned the value over the last few years of being physically together in worship, haven't we. Like schools, we've found that we can assemble and participate in at least the liturgy of the church online, through broadcasts, but we have also found that something is missing. It is certainly better than nothing, and for some is a vital connection to this community that they would otherwise be more isolated from. We are all in on this valuable resource. But when you are not in the same space, breathing the same air, feeling another's presence beside you, hearing their voice directly, it just isn't the same. There is something about the incarnation- the enfleshment of being in person that changes how we receive this activity. That is, I would argue, essential. That is why God sent Jesus- God in the flesh- to us.

Yet, there is more to this faith thing than just being together and going through the liturgy. This is what our text from Isaiah points to and it is a refrain you hear time and again from God and God's prophets in their complaints to Israel over the ages. That while they go through the motions of worshipping God- they offer sacrifices, go to the synagogue, follow the food laws- while they do these actions, they ultimately do not live out what that worship and study are supposed to lead

to. A transformed individual and society. For the Israelites it is often a failure to live out the command to feed the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted, care for widows, orphans, the immigrants and foreigners in society, those who have no agency of their own. If you don't do these things, God says, then all the rest means nothing to me. God continually ties action and devotion together.

Jesus makes the same point to the leader of the synagogue. Yes, you know the rules for the sabbath and how to keep it. But you do not even see this woman bent in two and even though you set free a donkey on the Sabbath to get a drink, you won't set free this woman bound by her affliction. Jesus' point is that faith in God is a verb. An action word. A lived response to Jesus' call to follow him- to do what he does, act as he acts. To see those who others overlook and to heal them, free them, feed them, love them. Just as God in Jesus Christ has done for us.

Yet, that's not all.

Whenever Jesus is in town, he calls people together around him. He assembles them to hear the Word of God proclaimed. He engages those assembled around questions of faith and calling. This, too, is an essential part of what it means to follow Jesus. Just as the act of reading, studying, being taught are key to an education- so too is the act of reading and studying scripture- as Martin Luther says in his explanation of the third commandment- we are not to despise preaching and the Word but rather hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

You see this in Isaiah as well. If you don't go your own way, serve your own interests, pursue your own affairs, but rather honor the Sabbath- then you shall take delight in the Lord. Because you will truly know God. And if you don't live

out what that Sabbath worship calls you to, then your presence in the assembly is nothing but a show put on for others. Both are true.

I have talked much these past weeks about the peace of God, that peace that comes through the Spirit. Do you remember what that peace, Shalom means? Yep, wholeness. A pulling together of disparate but essential parts. A uniting of them into something that is greater than that sum.

This is what Jesus, what God in the Hebrew Scriptures is pointing to. That on their own; assembling in fellowship, worshipping God and following the “rules”, serving our neighbors does nothing for us or the world. But when you unite those three things. That’s when we are transformed. When we have Shalom- wholeness, peace.

Coming to worship to tick off a box, to check the mark that says you are follower of God, would miss the mark as fully as the leader of the synagogue. To spend your time feeding the hungry, helping the poor, seeing the marginalized is wonderful and a hungry person doesn’t really care who feeds them- but it doesn’t save- either you or them. It doesn’t truly free either of you. You have a full belly and satisfaction- but you are still in bondage.

God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit is loose in the world and cannot be contained. But there are a few places where we are promised that you can encounter God in Jesus Christ and all of those are present in worship. In the waters of baptism- which I am so glad that our sibling in Christ Kim continues to be so bold as to dip into each time she comes forward to receive the second place Christ is present, and that is in the Meal. The third promise is in the Word. By

which we mean first and foremost Jesus. But it is also scripture- read, sung, proclaimed. All of which happens here. Now. On this Sabbath day.

It is here, in physical assembly that we do the hard work of practicing being an outpost of the kingdom of God here on earth. Where we regularly hold each other to account for our sin- where we even call it sin. Those places where we have attended too much to ourselves, where we have missed the bullseye in our actions and words. Where we hear the words of Jesus calling us to account, just as he did the leader of the synagogue. Calling us to look at all those in our assembly, in the world, who we have overlooked. Reminding us of those who we have not set free from all that binds them. Calling us to see both ourselves and them clearly.

It is here, also, that we receive grace. That unmerited and surprising love that comes just because we are created in the image of God. And God loves us for that! To receive a word of forgiveness that unravels bonds we didn't even know we had. We all know an experience like that- where you get an undeserved and unearned gift. What joy, relief, excitement lies in it. We receive that grace from God and practice showing it to one another in this assembly.

It is here that we find what it truly means to be in community. I am reminded of Joyce and Dick who buried their son last Saturday after his sudden death and then came to worship last Sunday. They told me they needed to be here. To be surrounded by their siblings in Christ. To hear and experience the good news of God in Jesus Christ. To stay away was unthinkable. To attend online would have been unsatisfying. They needed to hear the good news of God in Jesus Christ in the midst of their grief, but also to experience it from this assembly.

Our assembly around Word and Sacrament- the discipline of that, the gift of that, is essential to our life as followers of Jesus. The time spent daily in the presence of God through prayer, scripture, conversations around faith, is essential to our life as followers of Jesus. AND

The living out of that faith through words and actions is essential to faith. The seeing of those who society has bent over, who are afflicted with the evil of spirits like addiction, poverty. Who must contend with racism and bias of all kinds. Who cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps because they have no boots. The movement to help free them from those things which bind them so that they too might experience the freedom that only Christ can give, is essential to our life as followers of Jesus.

It is when we live in the wholeness of both of these things, not the perfection, but the integration- that we experience the peace of God. The wholeness that comes from being filled and pouring out. It is in this Shalom that we are truly freed. Freed from the “rat race”, the constant “on-the-go-ness” that is our lives. Do you know what Sabbath literally means in Hebrew? Stop. It is a command to stop. To be still and know that God is God and you aren’t. That it is not your labor that provides your daily bread, but God. To be freed from being irrevocably responsible for everything- because that is God’s job. To come here and rest- because God is here- guaranteed. And only God- who created us and loves us can free us from all that enslaves us.

May the peace, the Shalom of God be with all of you- in the assembly with fellow followers of Jesus, in our worship and in your devotion, and in your life lived in loving your neighbors. Amen.