

Broken Yokes

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Is. 58:9-14, Lk 13:10-17

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The Prophet Isaiah writes during a time of reconstruction after terrible defeat.
The last of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah
 had fallen to Babylonian invasion.
 Leaders and professionals were deported to Babylon
 and foreigners took command in their place.
 Laborers worked to enrich conquerors.
 Powers prospered off the poor.
Now, Babylon itself had fallen
 and the exiled descendants were allowed to return and rebuild their nation.

It would take great effort.
It would take commitment, sacrifice, working together.
It would take looking out for one another, lifting all people together.
It would take holding fast a vision of the future while struggling in the present.
It would take a kind of spiritual and psychological maturity
 that refuses acrimony, criticisms, division, derision,
 that attends to immediate needs of persons as fundamental to national security.
It would take commitment to the ways of God
 that insist all people have access to adequate food, health care, housing,
 the ways of God that insist the legal system be equitable and just for all people,
 rich and poor, Black and White, citizen and immigrant.

Then "light shall rise in darkness."

Then "you shall be like a watered garden" of economic growth and social prosperity.

Then "you shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Our yoke is *not* taxes or unfair markets or foreigners taking jobs.
 Our yoke is a powerful few dictating our laws.
 Our yoke is weak people casting blame and calling names.
 Our yoke is society that judges appearance and ignores character.
 Our yoke is suspicion and fear and grasping.

The prophet writes,

"I you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
 from pursuing your own interests on my holy day...
then you shall take delight in the Lord,
 and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth."

Not just taking the day off,
 but honoring the sabbath day by remembering and recommitting
 to God's ways *all* days for God's people.

The leader of the synagogue lost that lesson.

500 years after the Prophet Isaiah wrote,

Jesus is teaching on the sabbath when a woman shows up.

First, this is in the synagogue, on the sabbath.

Women have a reserved section apart from men.

The practice was men teaching men, with women passively listening.

A woman shows up, bent and crippled, unable to stand straight,
 in pain sitting, in pain walking, in pain sleeping.

She slips silently to listen.

In the middle of the lesson,

Jesus notices the woman shuffling to a seat, stops his teaching and strides over.

"Woman, you are set free..."

Then takes her by the arm.

Immediately she straightens, *and the very next thing she does* is loudly praise God!

In the synagogue where women are to be silent.
 On the sabbath, the holiest day of the week, in a holy place, among holy scriptures,
 she *sings* God's praise!
 What could honor God more?

Then a sour puss throws cold water.
 It's not the way things are done.
 The silverware gets put in its own place and pots have certain shelves.
 There's a right way and a wrong way.
 We have policies.
 We have procedures.
Our ministries come first.

The leader of the synagogue was *not inaccurate* about the 3rd Commandment of the Lord,
 "You shall remember the sabbath day and keep it holy."

But he was wrong about *why* this commandment was given.

Remembering the sabbath day
is not about our duty to go to church on Sunday
 —make it a quick hour, we have company coming over for brunch.

Remembering the sabbath day
is not about getting worship all correct and robust singing filling the hall.

The sabbath is a *gift to creation*.

The sabbath is *an integral part of life*, a pause in work.

The sabbath is a moment to remember that *we are creatures*,
 that the Lord commands our existence and fortune,
 that we rest in the goodness and benevolence of Our Creator,
 sustained and nurtured by this One who loves and delights in us.

The 3rd Commandment, and all the laws of God,
 are not the way *we become* God's people.

The laws of God are given as gift because *we are* God's people,
 laws given to allow life to flourish.

The synagogue leader forgot that, forgot that our responsibility as God's people, as human beings,
 is to build up, honor, rectify.

And so, a woman shackled and yoked by pain is set free on the sabbath
 to worship God as was always intended on the sabbath.

She praises God on the sabbath,
 remembering her Lord,
 recognizing the One who loves and delights—and makes her whole.

But freeing is frightening.

When I was a boy, my grandfather kept a bull chained to a stake apart from the cows.
 When the bull was needed,

Grandpa would take up the chain and lead the bull to the cow pen.

The bull weighed nearly a ton, was as big as my Prius,
 could pull a plow through hard-packed clay.

But the bull always followed my skinny grandfather.

It was the ring in its nose.

From the time it was a calf, the bull had that ring.

From the time it was a calf, the bull was staked by that ring.

From the time it was a calf, the bull was conditioned to the limits of the ring.

As a calf it did not have the strength the pull the stake or fight the nose ring.

So, when it was full-grown,

the bull could easily pull up the stake, could easily rip the ring from its nose,
 could easily trample my grandfather,

but would not.

The bull did not have *the imagination* to think otherwise.
 The bull was yoked *by its own mind*, conditioned to a frame of mind that was no longer true.
 It could not imagine a world where it could roam wherever it wanted,
 eat in whatever pasture it wanted.
 It was yoked by condition and tradition.

Tradition yokes imagination.
 Tried and true ways of doing things shackles new experiences.
 Assumptions of what is church and what makes for good worship
 divert from what is possible.
 Tried and true no longer work.
 What *has been* good about this church no longer works.

And exactly at that point *I get nervous*.
 By definition, what is new *is* going to be uncertain, unpredictable.
 I don't know what will happen down a new path.
 Three congregations sharing space as partners in serving God and neighbor,
 I don't know how that can work.
 I have been *conditioned* to think of church
 as solitary congregation of white traditionalists taking care of each other.

Then Jesus stops mid-worship,
 goes over to a bent woman who just wants to be left alone,
 removes her pain and has her stand
 and suddenly our whole way of doing things is upset.
 My whole way of thinking about church,
 my training 40 years ago, my practices ever since,
 are now upended and unworkable,
 and suddenly I am confronted with challenge to tradition
 and it makes me nervous.

Yet, it's not about us.
 It's not about our ways.
 It's not about keeping things comfortable and familiar.
 There are bent women among us.
 Jesus is giving us pause so as to reassess what is at the core of being church.
 Jesus is giving Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church pause to think again how we are to be.
 It's about *what God* is doing among us, with us.
 It's about how we, Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church,
 unable to continue as we are,
 short on money and short on people,
 are blessed by God, with gifts for life, with partners,
 to slip yokes of tradition
 and be repairers of the breach, restorers of streets, renewers of neighbors.
 It's about setting aside assumed ways and seeing differently.

Freedom is frightening, uncertain.
 Yet it's what makes possible a new future.
 Freedom from conditioned thinking opens imagination to God.
 We are given freedom to imagine
 what is at the core of church,
 what might be the future of this church,
 how we can be a church for the neighborhood,
 how we might fulfill *God's* intentions for Lake Nokomis.

Amen.