

Sermon for Proper 16

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Isaiah 58:9b-14](#) / [Psalm 103:1-8](#) / [Hebrews 12:18-29](#) / [Luke 13:10-17](#)

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 22nd, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

True Religion

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Isaiah tells us this day:

*If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,*

But then there's this Gospel:

The leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

You might think, based on these two readings, that people have a hard time "getting" sabbath day. . . and you'd be correct. Like any religious tradition, the Sabbath has stood for thousands of years as the standard observance for the Jewish tradition, and one that no one can perfectly uphold. Christians, as you know, shifted the tradition to Sunday, but retained the insistence on keeping Holy Day, acknowledging our Jewish roots and the necessity of worship and rest. Yet we continue to struggle to keep it, as in keeping any religious tradition, because just as the people did in Isaiah's time, in Jesus' time, and in our time, there are two traps that lure us away from the religious value of Sabbath, of Holy Day, of our set aside time to stop be with God. And both remain very near us in contemporary American society:

The first is one with which we are most familiar living in our liberal part of the world. It's a kind of laissez-faire approach to Sundays, to worship, to honoring our God. The author of Isaiah saw something similar happening in his time as well. The time off part of sabbath people can handle. It's the worship side of it, the time set aside for prayer, that is so much more difficult. We know it best as shopping, mountain biking, or just sleeping in. Sabbath as a time to suit ourselves. It's a hard reminder, but at least we know now we're not alone with all the lures around us that keep us from attending to the spiritual nurture of faithful living, of attending to holy rest, which includes prayer together.

The second trap is the harsh legalism that Jesus encounters in the synagogue leader – the accusation that strict adherence to the Sabbath tradition was essential to being faithful. Stray outside of those boundaries for any reason at all would put us out of the tradition and engender a swift rebuke. We know this trap by simply reading the arguments of our latest culture wars, the angry rhetoric of the Christian right, the somehow cheap religiosity made up of platitudes and rules that, if not followed, will likely come crashing down on our heads one way or another. We can see the theology of a God of rules all about us, and that is a theology rooted in fear, in dread, and sometimes even damnation.

The real difficulty is that neither the laissez-faire “do whatever” nor harsh legalisms about a life with God serve us at all well as religion. One refuses the discipline of accountability. The other holds up of the finger of accusation, wagging at us continually. Shame and guilt have a short shelf-life, if you ask me. Even shorter when someone is getting paid to do the finger wagging!

So what do we do?

One place we might turn is to the religious who have always been with us – to those who have made vows to attend to the holy days and prayers of our tradition, who have put them first before all else. We get to meet some of them this autumn as part of our adult education series: Benedictines, Franciscans, Gregorians. A few weeks ago, I was with the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory at a retreat house in New York, making my own discernment in an apostolic religious life that seemed best to comprehend my call to family and parish living. But like every other religious community, whether living scattered in the world or closely in cloister, the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory struggles mightily with the tensions of our readings today: between the “let-it-be” approach to a Brother failing to keep his vows and the legalistic monitoring of religious behavior that

tends to breed fear. Both are death-dealing to community, to trust, and to hope in the Gospel.

The week's conversation began with group discussions about living the vowed life. The Brotherhood's governing council had been struggling with how best to hold members accountable to their vows, to be pastoral rather than police-men. It seems almost counter-cultural when we first hear business about the "vowed life," but think for a moment about the vows you have taken. Many of you have undertaken vows of marriage. Some of you have made promises about your relationship with communities of various kinds, both secular and sacred. The great majority of you have made vows in baptism to be attentive to the breaking of the bread, the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and the prayers. Really, we all live a vowed life. Religious communities just bump it up a few notches, highlighting the baptismal vows as primary and committing to the deep accountability of intentional community that will help each member live more fully into them. Christian marriage, incidentally, is also about precisely this, for love of neighbor is among our most cherished disciplines as Christ's beloved. And who is a closer neighbor than our spouse?

So there we were, seated in a room – I the newly discerning, seated across from brothers who had been part of the community from almost its inception over forty years ago. We were wisely instructed not to try to solve one another's problems – to avoid what one of the brothers aptly called the "male answer syndrome." Instead we were asked to listen with open hearts as each member of the community described his struggles to live into the life of vows the order undertook. No one lived into the vows perfectly, of course, and soon came the recognition that we all live in glass houses. So who was going to start throwing stones? It was a profound lesson in humility.

When we accuse, we are indeed, as Jesus rightly calls us today, hypocrites. No one is perfectly religious, even the most faithful among us. But what happened in that discussion was transformative for the Brotherhood as they struggled with the growing pains of moving into a third generation, larger and more diverse than they ever have been before as a community. The vows bind the community together for the intentionally religious, they bind the community together for the baptized as we are bound in this parish and with the wider Church. What we all learned was living those vows perfectly is the domain of no one. Rather, it is in the showing up and remaining faithful to the pursuit of the vows that brings growth, that engenders the love of God. Likewise, many of you know in the married life that it is not perfection that deepens the relationship, but the

toughing it out and showing up for one another that builds the deep love that makes all else possible.

Brothers came up to me after that conversation, a few of them apologetic to me, saying anxiously that intense, serious conversations like this don't happen every year. I got the impression that they were afraid I might turn tail and hop the next train to JFK. "What?" I asked somewhat surprised, "You think this community is unusual?" It seemed like health to me as I reflected on our struggles here at Church of Our Saviour, our triumphs and slip-ups together over the past four years, and how far we've come. . . but not because we are perfect. Only because we are faithful in the best sense – we stick with the baptismal vows that bind us together. Those of you who are regular here learn this sooner or later. Simply bowing out when the road gets rough serves no one, and harkens back to the self-serving ways Isaiah warns us against. But nor does the finger-wagging legalism of the religious leadership in today's Gospel. What serves is the commitment to the life presented to us by our loving God. And that commitment is about the pursuit of grace in community together. And, I suppose, it's about grace pursuing us, too, all of us together!

Late in the week with the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, as I became a postulant, I was given a cross. And it was not a new cross, and it is not mine forever. It stays with me so long as I discern whether or not to profess vows in that particular community, and it has been held by postulants and novices in the Brotherhood before – the varnish worn away over twenty-four years, the letters of the patron saint worn down. My minister provincial jokes about some of the crosses bearing tooth-marks, the tough prayers of discernment leaving their imprints on the soft wood that signifies our Christian pilgrimage.

The marks of our spiritual journey are marks of commitment well-worn, like an old pew, a Bible and prayer book needing rebinding, a parish roof needing a makeover. Our organ is torn apart this week for improvement, the carpet is a bit threadbare in places. Tape holds down the tiles that lead to the altar rail. These are the signs of a healthy community, it seems to me, not a perfect one (which doesn't exist) nor a lazy one (which can't survive). These are the signs of a healthy community that knows how to keep Sabbath, to hold Holy Day, of Christians committed to showing up in pursuit of those pesky vows we repeat every time we baptize. For we know that it is that compassionate commitment, not perfect commitment, that is most real, that is most true. . . true to our God. . . true our Beloved Christ. . . and what we might dare call "true religion."