

Bring Your Pain to Church
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Luke 13:10-17 & Isaiah 58:9b-14

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“But 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.””

Behind the synagogue leader's exhortation is a great reverence for keeping the Fourth Commandment, a concern at the heart of the prophet Isaiah's exhortation, which we heard in the first lesson this morning when he prophesies, “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 honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Doubtless, the leader of the synagogue had many passages from the Law and the Prophets like this one in mind when he rebuked the crowd. And it's likely Isaiah would join the leader of the synagogue in blaming the crowd for “trampling the sabbath” in overrunning the leader's synagogue and “pursuing [their] own interests” by seeking healing on the sabbath day.

Our readings from Isaiah and Luke reflect a long-running religious debate about what it means to keep the sabbath *holy*. Is the leader of the synagogue honouring the sabbath by telling people to come back on the other six days of the week, or does Jesus' vision of what is appropriate to be done on the sabbath accord better with the ideal of sabbath-keeping enjoined by the Law and the Prophets in general and Isaiah in particular? As Christians, we have certainly sided with Luke on this one, but it's worth digging into *why* this is so.

In Luke's account, it is interesting to note that the leader of the synagogue is not bold enough to accuse Jesus directly of breaking the Fourth Commandment, which according to Jewish commentators I read on this passage, affirm that he did not. The leader knows he can't attack Jesus for healing on the sabbath, so he attacks those who come to Jesus for healing. *He cannot rebuke the healer, so he rebukes those who need the healing.*

I have to say here that I have some sympathy for the leader's position. It would certainly be difficult to conduct a religious service “decently and in order,” were this place overrun by people who came here not for the service itself, but for some itinerant faith healer who happens to be in attendance. I might get indignant myself, if during Mass, the church should be overrun by people here not to worship God in Word and Sacrament, but to see a celebrity in attendance who was randomly handing out million-dollar cheques. That's essentially the effect of Jesus' actions—he's being *indiscriminately generous* with what he has, and people are beginning to get out of hand.

Imagine the scene at that synagogue: The leader is trying to read the Torah with reverence and protect the sacred scrolls from being touched, but nobody's listening and everybody's jostling to get closer to Jesus. Jesus' presence must have been very *annoying* to this leader, for good reason.

While I am sympathetic to this poor frazzled worship leader, my empathy is drawn ultimately to that woman who had been “bent over and quite unable to stand up straight” for “*eighteen* long years.” To her,

the issue of how best to keep the sabbath isn't even a secondary issue. I would wager it wasn't even on her radar. Such debates, simply put, are *irrelevant* when one is in chronic *pain*.

To this woman, the leader's message is essentially, "Don't bring your pain to synagogue. Leave it at home." Of course, that doesn't mean he wants *her* to stay at home; he just doesn't want to be bothered by her pain. He doesn't want to be confronted with the fact of it, because he knows that he has no easy answers, no remedies, nothing to give her. And so the leader tries to keep what he believes is the main thing the main thing: hearing the Scriptures, saying the prayers, and so forth. Sure, everybody's welcome. But *leave your pain at home*.

Many churches nowadays communicate the same underlying message as that leader, which in our own context is: "Don't bring your pain to church." Join us in person or via livestream, but don't bother us with your pain. It's too awkward, too inconvenient. Another person's pain exposes our own powerlessness to help and to heal. So it's easier to pretend that everything's OK, and to encourage people for whom this is clearly *not* the case to come to church and pretend for ninety minutes or so that they're OK, too. It is as if those in pain are given a script to memorize and recite: "Yes, thank you, I'm fine. My, wasn't it hot yesterday! Sure, I'd love a cup of coffee. Well, gotta go. Lots to do this afternoon!"

Even when communities don't encourage their members to hide their pain, the members themselves may live in a self-enforced silence out of a desire not to draw undue attention. Most of Canada, I have found, is this way. Problem is, when pain is your constant companion, if you successfully *hide* your pain, you end up successfully hiding an important part of your *true self*—which may be exactly the point. Who wants to see all that ugliness? Who wants to hear about it? Who wants to come off as needy?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting we jettison an admirable measure of reticence; the polar opposite of not sharing your pain is just as bad, if that means becoming incurably mean or bitter or self-pitying. I'm not recommending self-indulgence or wallowing. I'm not issuing licences to "just let it all hang out." But I do think that it's OK to admit that when we are in pain, we *do* get angry and feel bitter, we *do* get stuck at times in self-pity or anger—anger at others, anger at ourselves—anger at nothing in particular. We *do* get depressed and anxious.

The woman in the synagogue who had been bent over in pain, bound by Satan "for eighteen long years" was probably not all sweetness and light all the time. Luke is silent as to whether this woman was a nice person or not. For all we know she could've been a real pill. But Jesus respects her dignity by calling her "a daughter of Abraham." And he offers her not just healing, but *wholeness*.

The fact of the matter is that all of us have needs and some of us are in physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. While I'm as big a fan of the good ol' "stiff upper lip" as my Anglo-Canadian grandmother was; if we cannot appropriately share our deepest concerns with each other in the Church, the question is: Where *are* we going to do that? If not on the Christian sabbath day, on which *other* day of the week will we seek *healing* and *wholeness*?

Of course, sharing and being vulnerable about what's going on in our lives may do little, if anything, to alleviate the situation. Mutual support may not make our backs hurt any less or our cancers go into remission. Pastoral care by itself won't raise the dead or lay our ghosts to rest. But *presence* is what we have to offer one another. And you'd be surprised how far the simple "ministry of presence" goes. Like the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament, its effects are mysterious. I do know one thing, though: God uses us for good when we are willing to be *with* each other in our pain and suffering, when we

rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. God's M.O. in the world, as you've heard me say before, is a *redemptive* one. God takes our worst and *transforms* it—if only we are willing to be *known* by God, and known as well by those who *want* to know and serve us in God's name.

Over the next several months, I am planning, with the help of key lay leaders and clergy colleagues, to develop a new approach to pastoral care in this parish, one which I hope will empower clergy and laity alike to become more effective ministers of pastoral care. But in order for it to work, we as individuals and as a community need to support each other by *sharing* our concerns, as well as our *information* and *resources*. This all applies, of course, to the preacher as well as to the congregation. Within appropriate boundaries, I must be available to you, and I must also share my concerns with you. I hope that with regard to the former, I *am* accessible. For all that I bang on about accessibility in general, I also have to be accessible myself.

But I am also aware that often I am running from one task to the next, and may at times give the impression that I'm too busy for anyone's particular concerns. One way I try to make up for this is by putting my mobile number on the back of the Parish Notices every week, and plastering my email everywhere. I carry that phone everywhere, except when I'm in cassock. I wish I were more proactive in reaching out and checking in, but I am always grateful when members of this congregation give me a head's up on who needs a little checking in on—many members are an inspiration to me in this regard; pastoral care seems to come much more naturally to them. I am grateful as well for those who are proactive about making their own upcoming surgery or life-changing circumstances known to me.

Life is fragile and short and too often full of pain, and we don't get a day off from its cares, not even the sabbath day. But we are given the sabbath day and *every* day as a *gift*, and I believe that it truly does become meet and right to give God thanks and praise at all times and everywhere when we bring our whole person—ourselves, our souls and bodies—to church, whether we're on top of the world or suffering in our bodies or in our spirits, whether we ourselves are hurting or are *hurting for* another.

We may never be healed in the same way that poor bent woman was healed in the synagogue, but I do know one thing: If we never place ourselves in Jesus' Presence by bringing our pain to church, we'll never give God the chance to heal us in the first place! But *if* we do, I believe God will use this parish to endow us with the dignity and wholeness we need to face *whatever* life throws our way. And more than that, we will become a *blessing* to each other, despite and even in the face of whatever pain it is that we're bringing to church.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.