

Following Whose Rules

There are many voices expressing displeasure with the events which seem to be happening daily in our culture; events of violence; events which seem to be ever-widening the various factions of our nation and culture. And it seems that those on the extreme sides of each issue are the loudest, and each claims that they have “right” on their side...that their view and stance is justified beyond doubt. In both of our readings this morning the same event—worship on the Sabbath is at the center of two different perspectives. The prophet Isaiah whose words we read follows in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem, but is addressing the people at a much later time in their journey as covenant people. This text comes from the one known as Isaiah of the Return because he lived and spoke to the people who have returned to the land after their exile in Babylon. In second Isaiah, while living in Babylon they had received a word of hope; a word which promised them renewal. In this passage the prophet proclaims that the Lord will fulfill that promise as the people fulfill their call to act justly and to honor the Sabbath. The Lord promises to guide them continually and satisfy their needs, allowing them to rebuild their homeland’s ancient ruins, but it this word is framed as a conditional promise—they are to act justly and honor the Sabbath. Acting justly is defined here as to remove the yoke that oppresses others and to refrain from pointing of the finger which treats others with contempt; to refrain from slander and speaking of evil. Additionally to act justly is to give of oneself to the hungry and oppressed. Although our English text reads this as offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted, the Hebrew word *nephesh* conveys a broader giving; the giving of one’s whole being. It is this level of giving that will create a light that will rise out of darkness. *Nephesh* is used again to describe how this acting will totally satisfy and continually nourish the one giving as well so they are like a watered garden. It is also interesting that while the beginning of chapter 58 addresses the behavior of the community as a whole with the plural you, beginning with the 6th verse, the “you” becomes singular. In other words, each individual member of the community has responsibilities to uphold for the sake of the whole community. Each member of the community who upholds the values of justice will receive the Lord’s promises. Individuals are also called to act a certain way with regard to worshipping God in return. For one thing in return for this there will be delight in the Lord. Keeping the Sabbath properly and acting justly toward the neighbor are intricately connected; to pursue and serve one’s own interests or affairs by unjust actions at any time or place is to trample and dishonor the Sabbath. Earlier in this chapter, the God addresses the current religious practices which featured “fasting” as a form of worship among the well to do. God’s response is to proclaim the “fast” chosen which would please God would be to relieve the fasting of the poor who fast by necessity. God chooses a fast which ironically is to provide food for the hungry which enables them to break their fast. Other things necessary to a decent life must be supplied as well: freedom from economic oppression and injustice, clothing and housing and neighborly kindness instead of personal attack. It seems worship providing life’s necessities for all is what wins God’s favorable attention; that is what God accepts as proper Sabbath worship. Worship of God biblically does have rituals outlined in the text, but clearly God’s desire is for the rituals to be carried out in a just society which lives according to all the commandments about community. Although Christianity moved the day set aside for formal worship from the Jewish Sabbath which begins at sundown on Saturday to Sunday as the day of resurrection, for both

faiths there are two traditions concerning this observance's meaning. One, based on events as narrated in Genesis while the other is based on the Exodus narrative. For both traditions, the Sabbath was meant to be a day of delight, rest, enjoyment for all. The Ten Commandments are given twice in our scriptures—in Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20 with virtually no difference between them except for that fourth commandment about keeping and honoring the Sabbath. Exodus 20 grounds the observance in the six days of creation when God “worked” while resting on the 7th thereby blessing and consecrating it so it would be a day of rest for all—including slaves and animals. Deuteronomy also contains the instructions about resting and avoiding work but no longer cites God's creative work but instead lifts up God's redemptive work which freed them from slavery in Egypt. Again, all were to be sharing in this God planned rest. When I was growing up, the culture around here was dominated by so called “Blue Laws”. No stores were open; only those who worked in the fields of law enforcement and medicine were found at their positions—and positions were those which specialized in emergencies. The leader of the synagogue described in Luke's gospel would have favored that setup. Although the world has greatly altered those strict observances such that there are few stores which remain closed on Sundays, I rarely take advantage of the opportunity to shop on Sunday. But in the passage from Luke this morning we have Jesus “doing work” on the Sabbath, and not for the first time. Luke's gospel consistently lifts that Jesus comes from Jewish stock. Some may call Luke's gospel Gentile friendly, but the narrative clearly embraces Jesus' Jewishness with the birth narrative, the circumcision rite and Temple sacrifice with Jesus' first sermon coming in his hometown synagogue. This is emphasized when earlier in the narrative Jesus has “set his face to Jerusalem”. It is clear as this passage begins, Jesus is again teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when this woman appears in the assembly. Although not named in the description, we are told that she has been crippled for eighteen years; bent over and unable to stand up straight. While some frame this passage as an example of a healing miracle the healing is actually very understated, no healing pyrotechnics just a simple laying on of hands as he spoke. “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He laid his hands on her and she stood up straight. Two short descriptive sentences; no proclamation about her faith; just a simple pronouncement that she has been set free from her ailment. So “healing” has occurred, but Jesus' words indicate something else has happened. His pronouncement to her has “set her free.” The power of the miracle is in what precedes and follows it: Jesus announces her freedom from the crippling spirit with a word and when she is healed, the healing happens in the form of the divine passive: in the Greek it states “she was straightened up” assuming God as the agent. What immediately follows is the synagogue leader's admonishment of Jesus for doing “work” on the Sabbath, after all the Law gives six days for work so it could have easily been done on another day without breaking the Law of no work on the Sabbath. The text does not give us the words of Jesus' teaching, but what Jesus has done here is the illustration of what he proclaimed in his first sermon—he has set her free. When responding to the synagogue leader, Jesus names her as a daughter of Abraham...who should be set free at once after her eighteen years of suffering. Jesus points out that delay would be treating her as of less value than an animal belonging to them needing care on the Sabbath. Jesus and the synagogue leader have both made claims about the “ought of work” Luke also uses this concept to explain what is necessary for Jesus to do as God's agent. For Jesus the ought is not about a divine necessity to work only on the other six days,

but based on a divine necessity to have this woman freed from bondage. Jesus here does not supersede Jewishness with his claims about the Sabbath, but rather intensifies the claims theological grounding in the necessity of God and God's purposes to heal, liberate and unbind. It should be understood that Jesus does this within the Jewish tradition for a daughter of Abraham shows that God keeps showing up, drawing the circle just a little wider and unleashing a divine horizon that brings rejoicing over the loosing of every human bondage. It should be noted that the synagogue leader's complaint is a faithful reading of the Torah, on the surface. Also Jesus' response is not a rejection of the Torah rulings about the setting aside of the 7th day by God for Israel's rest. In fact, Jesus argues for healing on the Sabbath based on the legitimate allowances of restricted kinds of "work" on the Sabbath. Jesus argues the great worth of a daughter of Abraham justifies "healing" for what could be better than to set her free on a day set aside to remember God's liberation of Israel. This healing has resulted in praise to God from the woman and rejoicing among the crowd. The synagogue leader has missed the point; Jesus' actions have been to bring God's reign in healing power to those who most need it. Jesus routinely did things on the Sabbath that got the religious authorities angry at him. And in every case Jesus took the opportunity to remind them that despite their pious intentions, they had rather significantly misunderstood the purpose behind the Sabbath—Sabbath had to do with both creation and redemption—the creation of God's reign on earth and the freeing of God's people to delight in their relationship with God as the creation is returned to the glory God intended from the beginning. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the purpose of the Law is to provide us guidance in how to live with each other so that all of us may get more out of this life and world we share. The Law, in short promotes civility, cooperation and health. It lends a certain order to our lives, order that creates space in which to flourish and grow. The law is given to the Israelites by God not to help them become God's people but as a precious gift because God had already made them God's people. But we don't always use the Law as God intended. Simply because law does lend a modicum of order to a chaotic world we are often seduced into thinking that creating and maintaining order is the purpose of the law. We forget that the order provided by the law is not an end in itself but is meant to serve life and health. The law prohibiting work on the 7th day was meant to ensure people who had been slaves for years and never knew rest would actually be guaranteed at least one day of rest a week. Thus explaining Jesus' words that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. In not setting aside the Sabbath Law Jesus offers another perspective on what the Law is meant to do and how when we fail to care for one another as provided by the Law, grace enters and restores us to each other. It is mercy and grace above and beyond all the laws ever received or conceived which reveals the absolute law is love: love God and love your neighbor, or perhaps by loving your neighbor, love God. So when we consider our world and the laws we design and follow it might help us to remember Jesus' perspective that law is meant for guidance, but all actions need to conform to God's law of love revealed in Jesus' teachings and actions. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.