

Isaiah 58:6-14

Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter---when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you; and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations, you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in the heights of the land, and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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." But the Lord answered him and said, "you hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

"Embodying Dignity"

When we describe the sitting posture, wrote Buddhist mindfulness practitioner, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the word that feels the most appropriate is 'dignity.'

Sitting down to meditate, our posture talks to us. It makes its own statement. You might say the posture itself is the meditation. If we slump, it reflects low energy, passivity, a lack of clarity. If we sit tamrod-straight, we are tense, making too much of an effort, trying too hard. When I use the word "dignity" in teaching situations, as in "Sit in a way that embodies dignity," everybody immediately adjusts their posture to sit up straighter. But they don't stiffen. Faces relax, shoulders drop, head, neck, and back, come into easy alignment. The spine rises out of the pelvis with energy. Sometimes people tend to sit forward, away from the backs of their chairs, more autonomously. Everybody seems to instantly know that inner feeling of dignity and how to embody it.

Perhaps we just need little reminders from time to time that we are already dignified, deserving, worthy. Sometimes we don't feel

that way because of the wounds and the scars we carry from the past or because of the uncertainty of the future. It is doubtful that we came to feel undeserving on our own. We were helped to feel unworthy. We were taught it in a thousand ways when we were little, and we learned our lessons well. So when we take our seat in meditation and remind ourselves to sit with dignity, we are coming back to our original worthiness. That in itself is quite a statement (Wherever you go there you are p. 107-108).

In Jewish piety, people of faith remind themselves of their original worthiness by claiming their identity as beloved children of God. One way of sitting tall within the Jewish tradition is by keeping the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, work stops. The land, the community, and the animals--- all rest, get refreshed, and have the opportunity to be restored. On the Sabbath, the community of faith fasts from their labor and people who have been bent down from the pressures of living, gather together for communal prayer and to rest in the Lord. Sabbath is not for sleeping in but for awakening to the Love of God in our soul. In his commentary on the gospel story about Jesus' healing of the bent-over woman on the Sabbath, theologian Richard Swanson, connects the claiming of Jewish dignity and Sabbath.

"This scene comes out of a world that remembered that Sabbath is different. Sabbath is not just a day of rest. It is a day of promise . . . Sabbath is welcomed into the house as a queen would be welcomed. Sabbath provides a foretaste of the culmination of all things, a glimpse of God's domination, a little slice of the messianic age dropped into the midst of regular time. Sabbath offers a remembrance of God's promise of peace and freedom for all of creation. It is a good thing, a gift from God . . . Sabbath had become a symbol of the resistance God's people offered to tyrants of every sort and every time . . . Sabbath is a day that lifts people's eyes to God's promise in the midst of the most unpromising circumstances (Provoking the Gospel of Luke).

When Jesus was teaching in the synagogue one Sabbath, he looked up and saw a bent-over woman who could not straighten up. Her worldview was limited to the ground beneath her feet. The

patriarchal society and religious community in which she lived had contributed to her bent down position by ascribing little value to her as a woman and by labeling her distorted condition as sinful. After eighteen long years she had internalized a shameful and guilt ridden, unworthy, undeserving concept of self. When Jesus saw her low posture, instead of continuing his teaching on the reign of God, he showed them what the healing, liberating, compassionate Love of God is like..

First, he spoke words of acceptance to her. "Woman," he said, "You are set free of your ailment." Woman was the term of honor and respect that Jesus used for his mother, Mary. Later, Jesus used another title of dignity for her when he challenged the religious leaders with the question in Luke 13:16: Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"

The Bible, commented Joyce Hollyday, speaks repeatedly of 'sons of Abraham', 'the seed of Abraham', and 'children of Abraham'; but nowhere else in the scriptures is a reference made to "daughter of Abraham." Jesus was telling the woman ---and those around her---that she was part of the family of Israel, a member of the community, a recognized human being---over the objections of those who would discard her humanity, who would place her a little below oxen and donkeys (Clothed With The Sun, p. 196).

After speaking, Jesus touched her. When he laid his hands on her immediately she stood up straight and began praising God . . . healed from internalized shame and guilt, freed from systemic oppression of sexism, and restored to joyful posture within the worshipping community . . . dignity fully embodied. When he said all this, his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at what he was doing. It's a rejoicing that can still be heard to this day in Sabbath keeping congregations that model Jesus' style of accepting word and liberating work with oppressed people everywhere.