New Hampshire Conference
United Church of Christ

2020 Annual Meeting
Worship Service

Sermon: “Sunday Delight”
Isaiah 58: 6:14
Luke 13: 10-17

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Introduction, Thank you and Prayer

Good Sunday morning, New Hampshire Conference. “Good shabbos,” our observant Jewish neighbors might say. I mean it -- what a delightful Sunday morning…When in the midst of EVERYTHING that, understandably, could have kept you apart, you have come together, despite it all. Well done, church. Well done.

I have enjoyed being with you…. to get to know you a bit this weekend. I thank your Conference Minister, Gordon Rankin, and the Annual Meeting Planning Committee for the opportunity.

My knowledge of New Hampshire and the UCC here is admittedly limited.

I have parishioners in Philadelphia who summer in Temple, NH. When I told them I was claiming that, they worried it’s such a small town many of you might not even know where it is.

Their daughter, Meg, in 2016 flew down with your conference’s youth, to the National Youth Event that was happening at Disney World. I was with the rest of the youth on an endless chartered bus ride from Philly, for about the same price as Meg’s plane ticket. So, I already think the New Hampshire Conference is smarter than the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference.

Otherwise, I only knew a few of you before this.

Carlos, from the planning committee, brought a group to Old First last winter. And Maren Tirabassi and I worked together on a congregational revitalization program some years ago. In those same years I rode my bicycle from Syracuse to Grand Rapids for General Synod with Martha Paulsen Clement from the Congregational Church of Laconia being one of them. Oh, and of course, David Felton, my dear friend and former
colleague from NY Conference. He is serving as an interim at First Church Jaffrey right now (which I believe is right next to the not so unknown town of Temple!) And this fall David is also your Conference’s Bridge ACM.

Those few and… Oh, and an inter-term course I took when at Union Seminary in the 80s with Bill and Suzie Briggs about their ministry in Franconia.

I think that is about all the NH cred. I’ve got.

But you’ve given me an incredible text in Isaiah to work with. The Gospel lesson of a Sabbath healing is awfully good news too. Hopefully, with those two and with the help of the Holy Spirit and the openness of God’s people to hear the Spirit’s message to the church I will have everything I need.

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my lips,
And the meditations of our hearts
Be acceptable to you, O Lord,
Our strength and our redeemer.

And all God’s children say, Amen.

The Sermon

Isaiah 58 thrusts us into a difficult time (as if our times aren’t hard enough!)
… a difficult time when the Israelites, returning home from the Babylonian exile, found that the restoration of their capital city and nation was not as easy as they had hoped or expected.

This is the context for those lines about repairing, restoring, renewing that are our focus. People of good faith long to see what’s broken get fixed, because we understand how much damage and hurt that brokenness brings. We want the mess cleaned up, we want what’s wrong made right, every valley raised up, the mountains and hills made low...especially when there seems to be so much mess, so much wrong and so much brokenness... Shattered people, Split families, Corruption, Racial divides, Political polarization and paralysis. The opioid crisis. Climate change and all the environmental chaos it is churning up. Our government’s inability to mount an effective, comprehensive response to the pandemic. Skyrocketing unemployment. Horrifyingly large prison populations. Repair. Restore. Renew. So that all that is wrong can be made right. To be the repairers of the breach. To rebuild the nation. To restore the church.

But our passage, church, isn’t just a hopeful promise. It’s God telling the people, us, what to do. Actually it is God telling us what we are doing wrong, and what we should be doing instead.
There is more in these verses, church, than those three heroic phrases. Actually, if we read the text carefully, (I hope we will) and follow God’s reasoning closely, those 3 vaunted REs -- repairing, rebuilding, restoring -- are not the means to an end. They are the result. A reward. That comes of undertaking the correction God has offered the people. And what is that? What is God asking of us?

First, God warns of being too sure of ourselves. Right before where we began reading this morning, the people have shifted the blame for their troubles -- not just to some scapegoat, or some favorite enemy, but to God, complaining, “We have done everything you have asked, but you aren’t paying attention, your caring for us.”

Their immediate goals were:

1) to get the Temple rebuilt for worship,

2) To get a wall built around the city for protection.

3) And to get right religion back into people’s daily lives.

From Babylon, second Isaiah, the prophet, had promised a triumphant return and a fabulous restoration of the community. And the exiles had taken that prophecy to heart: the imaginations of those longing to get back home had heard, and maybe even magnified, a remaking of Jerusalem and the nation to their former glories.

And now they are back and the prophesy is not turning out as expected. The rebuilding of the temple and the city was stalled completely. The roads weren’t even getting repaired. Leadership within the community was contested. Political divisions and violent disagreements were holding any progress back. Restoration -- both physically and socially -- was at a standstill. Drought and food shortages exacerbated the social strife and made rebuilding even more difficult. Economic and social inequities--homelessness, hunger, lack of clothing -- threatened the stability and identity of the Judean community.

Groups outside of the community regarded the returnees with suspicion. And the returnees themselves disagreed about how welcoming to outsiders they should be. Texts composed around this time are rife with this tension. Ezra-Nehemiah offer the exclusivist position. Third Isaiah and Ruth promote an inclusive viewpoint. There was turning out to be nothing particularly glorious about the situation, their circumstances or the prospects for Jerusalem and the nation.

Before we go any further, let’s stop for minute and step back from the 6th century BCE. Or step forward 2500 years. If you are listening carefully, some of their troubles probably sound familiar. Echo’s, not perfect parallels, the similarities: This hunger for making the nation great again that wasn’t panning out. Some desperation to get back into their sacred space so they could be faithful. Leadership is at each other’s throats, locked in a fight, such that nothing gets done. Physical infrastructure and cultural
identity both desperately need to be rebuilt, but no progress. Economic inequality has become so great, it’s undercutting general social well-being, and making peaceful co-existence difficult. There’s a housing shortage. Minimum wage isn’t a living wage. There are disagreements about diversity and assimilation. There is even this business about a wall that wasn’t yet finished.

Similarities enough. We might want to listen to what God says to the returned exiles in order to understand what God is asking of us.

What’s this Scripture telling us?

I believe that what God says is that what we do today and any time in worship needs to be more than rote ritual, self-justification, and making ourselves comfortable. If church is going to be authentic, it has to be less self-referential. I mean “real church” is about the real world. So it includes reflections, references, implications for what’s actually going on around us. Real worship doesn’t just challenge us; it has to change us.

You might not like my parallels, but if you argue with the connection I am trying to make, you might be arguing with God and not the preacher, because God says church is only really church if it changes how we handle everything else.

Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday” is in our New Century Hymnal… # 602. We call it, “Savior, God Above.” Thank you, Ashley, for leading us in it so beautifully! It’s one of Ellington’s most amazing compositions. He originally wrote it for “Black, Brown and Beige,” his musical reflection on the lives of Black people in the Americas. “Come Sunday” is about the plight of overworked and underpaid African Americans in the South, who on Sunday… On Sunday, at church, in worship, among their other everyday saints, these people oppressed and hard pressed all week, on Sunday found a freedom, they could really come together, that could sing and shout, they could worship their hearts out, and find the courage and the hope to face so much that was wrong in their world. An experience of faith so strong, it changed how they lived the rest of the week. For me, “Come, Sunday” has always felt like an anthem for the kind of church God delights in: the kind of worship Luke captures in the story of the woman healed on the Sabbath.

God’s answer, New Hampshire Conference, in essence God’s answer is: “If we do everything right, if we do everything right in worship, if we do everything right in church but our heart doesn’t turn inside out and grow… If we observed every holy & feast & fasting day just right, but If we aren’t healed and sent to heal others, if we don’t become apostles, if our worshiping selves don’t translate into witnessing, serving lives, if we don’t emerge in mercy and justice on the other days of the week. If church doesn’t make you big enough to take on the world, then “really,” God says, shaking God’s head in sorrow, “it’s not really church at all.”

But God’s talking about so much more than the one or two hours we spend
at church when we can gather, or the hours of our attention when we are apart. “Delight in worship” turns out to be like the fast God chooses. In this same passage, God says, “Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free? Is not the fast I choose to share your bread with the hungry?

Likewise, God says, ‘the “worship” that delights me’ Isn’t really about what we think of as worship at all. Not about right words, or right clothes, or even about the right congregation. Rather, the worship that delights me,’ God says, ‘is when you live faithfulness”

The returnees thought they needed the Temple rebuilt in order to get religion back into people’s lives,

But God says, it’s not so much about the buildings or any place set aside as sacred. It’s about my teachings that can go with you everywhere. It’s not so much about one day a week either. It’s about my teachings that can be your way always.

So what’s this mean for us, church? What does this mean for repair, restore, renew? It means we need to think, see, dream, and act bigger. We too often make the church too small. We need to get beyond the four walls of our sanctuaries. We need to get past the needs of our individual lives. We need to get outside the sacred confines of our Sabbath. And include realities that our church life would sometimes rather ignore. True church, like God’s love, is a calling about the redemption of the whole world.

Keeping Sabbath, healing Sabbath is about recognizing that every day and every person is holy and sacred. Faithfulness is not something we hide away at church about. It’s found out in the world where we are tested, Witnessing and doing God’s work. Church might be good practice, but the test comes out in the world. God says, “I delight in more than Sunday faith. My delight is when you are outside or far from the church building, when no one sees, when you’d rather do something else, but you still do right and love the good for my sake.”

What’s this look like in our day? To make church bigger? To make church about the world around us? Protecting the environment. Caring for the poor. Forgiving often. Rejecting racism. Fighting for the powerless. Sharing earthly and spiritual resources. Embracing diversity. Loving God. Enjoying Life. Does that litany sound familiar? It’s what in the United Church of Christ, we call “Being the church.” In all seasons, in all circumstances, in all places, New Hampshire Conference, let us every day keep Sabbath delight and be the church. Amen.