

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

9Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

11The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

12Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

13If 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;
14 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Superficial

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Superficial

God's people have a problem on their hands. They have been going through the motions, advertising to God that they're paying attention to his decrees, putting on a fine act. But God won't buy it. In fact, God isn't giving them the time of day. So they've grown tired: Why fast if God won't even give them credit by calling them righteous (v. 3a)? Why try to look righteous, if all God's going to do is point out their faults: "Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day, and oppress your workers" (v. 3b).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Scratching the Surface

Okay. So maybe the whole "oppress your workers" thing doesn't look so good for them. But, c'mon. Can't God just give them a pass? But God is relentless, and God's diagnosis is that infighting and hypocrisy (vv. 4-5), underpaying and abusing workers (vv. 6-7), and choosing profit over rest and worship (vv. 13-14) doesn't sit well with God. It's not only unjust to the neighbor, it's unfaithful to God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Heart of the Matter

God wants more than a superficial existence for us; and more than the appearance of good for our neighbor. Dip below the surface, and you will see the heart of the matter: God gives a damn about who we are, and whether we care for our neighbor. And

God knows that what we do, and how we treat others is a reflection of what we think about God. Do we give a damn? Or are we just damned?

PROGNOSIS: More than Skin Deep

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): More than Skin Deep

The good news for us is that what we deserve is not what we get with this God who sees beneath the surface. Instead, what we get is a God who not only chooses to wear the same flesh as we inhabit, but who invests deeply in our flesh. This is a God who calls out, "Here I am," both in the streets of Nazareth and from the cross at Calvary. This is the God who, when we call out "Lord, have mercy," hears; and whether we are ill and in need of healing, or hanging from our own cross and hoping to be remembered by him when he comes into his kingdom (v. 9a), he responds. This God, who could justifiably damn us, instead gives us Sabbath rest in his mercy. This God who restores, shows us why we can delight in the Sabbath (v. 13), not simply as a day of rest, but as God's assurance that God is immersed in our existence.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Deep, Watery Faith

Such assurance refreshes. It waters the parched places in our lives (v. 11). It baptizes us like water baptizes crops and gives them growth. In Jesus God shows us that God's love is more than superficial; in fact, it is fathomless. It is like a spring that never fails. And the more we drink from it, and swim in it, the more we want it—not just for ourselves, but for others.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Deep Living

It's amazing what a good watering can do for parched souls. Just when you think that all has withered and is about to die—that

there is no life left there—water can change everything. It's also amazing what happens as we trust that God has immersed himself deeply into our all-too-often superficial existence: No longer concerned about appearances, but instead invested in God's deep purpose, we offer food to the afflicted, pay workers a decent wage, we listen and measure our words so that we help rather than hurt (vv. 9-10). We become repairers of the breach, and restorers of the streets we live in. And life is deeper and more satisfying than we imagined it could be.