Dignity and rest (Isaiah 58:9b-14)

Isaiah’s two challenges go hand in hand.

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Isaiah 58 seems to make two dramatic demands of the ancient Israelites—and, by extension, of us.

First, if the people want to find favor in the eyes of God, they must engage in massive social reform. To serve God authentically is “to unlock the fetters of wickedness and to untie the cords of the yoke.” It is “to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin” (v. 6-7). Then and only then, the prophet insists, will Israel’s light again “burst like the dawn” and will it again be showered with blessing (v. 9f).

Second, the prophet instructs the people to commit more deeply and more genuinely to observance of Shabbat. “If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your affairs in My holy day; if you call the Sabbath ‘delight,’ the Lord’s day ‘honored’... then you can seek the favor of the Lord” (v. 13-14).

The two challenges go hand in hand. The first seeks to heal what is broken in the interpersonal sphere; the second seeks to restore the people’s intimate bond with God. One or the other will not suffice; for the people to live as God wishes, they must full-heartedly embrace both.

If we probe a little more deeply, it becomes clear that we cannot really speak of two separate spheres in the prophet’s words. On one level, one can distinguish between

commandments that concern the relationship between people and those that concern the relationship between people and God. Yet at a deeper level, some of the Bible's most fundamental commandments effectively erase this distinction, since, after all, how we treat others *is* in a sense how we treat God. "One who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker," says the book of Proverbs; "one who shows compassion for the poor honors [God]" (Proverbs 14:31).

The Shabbat commandment is a means of recognizing God as the One who brought the world into being (Exodus 20:11) and who redeemed us from slavery (Deuteronomy 5:15). It is clearly about our relationship with God. And yet notice just how socially radical the commandment is. In Deuteronomy 5:13-14, the reason the people are charged to observe Shabbat is so that their slaves will get to rest, too. Rest is not the privilege of the powerful but the right of everyone. Although this language is foreign to the Bible, it does not require a large step to conclude that the biblical Shabbat is premised in part on a commitment to human equality. Equality may not be a social and economic reality, but it remains a metaphysical truth—a truth in light of which all of your political arrangements ought to be judged.

The same subversive notion is built into the book of Exodus: when Pharaoh angrily refuses to let the people even take a holiday, he castigates Moses and Aaron for causing them to "cease their labors" (Exodus 5:5). As Ellen Davis has astutely noted, the word Pharaoh uses for ceasing labor is "*hishbatem*," from the same root as Shabbat. Thus it is the Egyptian despot who, in the very act of refusing to grant dignity to his workers, ironically introduces the notion of Shabbat that God will soon endorse. When the people serve Pharaoh, the very idea of granting them rest is seen as offensive. Yet when Moses lays down instructions for how to build the tabernacle, he begins by requiring Shabbat observance (Exodus 35:1-3). God embraces what Pharaoh detests: the dignity of workers.

Both of Isaiah's requirements—social reform and sabbath observance—thus share a common religious and ethical vision: a society worthy of receiving God's light is one that recognizes the inestimable worth of every human being, even and especially the vulnerable and downtrodden. It is a tall order, and one shudders to think how far we fall from it. But we are not free to desist from the spiritual and political work God places before us: to serve God and to embrace human beings are two tasks that are eternally and inextricably intertwined.