

Shriveled delight: Sunday, August 26. Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

As a weekend gardener, I have discovered the deep satisfaction of seeing the fruit of a well-watered garden. Months of tending and watering yield a delightful harvest of well-formed, abundant produce. In contrast, a hot summer with little water yields plants that are shriveled and produce that is unusable. For a casual gardener the difference is distressing; for a hungry family, the difference can be a matter of life and death.

Isaiah says that those who live justly and who delight in God are like well-watered gardens, satisfied and strengthened by God in a parched land. Those who feed the hungry, help the oppressed toward freedom, and comfort the afflicted find themselves sustained by God. In a disconcerting way, Isaiah links doing justice with taking delight in the Sabbath, and being fruitful with finding joy in God.

The prophet warns that those who pursue their own interests—trampling the poor and trampling the Sabbath—may seek God’s attention, but will not find God present to them. Just as Isaiah recognizes that behavior on the Sabbath can’t be separated from behavior on the other days of the week, we recognize that worship and daily practices are somehow all one piece. Any split between worship and life, between piety and practice, is finally deadly.

But it is surprisingly easy to get this wrong and to shrivel up. We trample the poor and trample the Sabbath when our primary concern is our own gain. When our focus is distorted, we quickly become disconnected from the source of life and we shrivel like plants whose roots are injured. It is heartbreaking to see a shriveled garden; it is terrifying to see a shriveled Christian or a shriveled church. Examples are common enough—individuals and congregations whose vision is no bigger than their own interests, whose personal agendas have displaced God’s bigger, scarier and less manageable purposes.

As we shrivel, pettiness replaces gratitude, peevishness displaces trust and delight. We are upset by minor inconveniences and we easily become indignant. We fail to

see our own wrongdoing and are eager to assign evil motives to others. Even beauty and goodness become irritations. Like fretful infants who turn away from their source of comfort, nothing satisfies. We are on our way to death.

The scene in Luke 13 seems to be an enactment of Isaiah's words. Jesus encounters a woman and sets her free from a crippling disease that has bent and bound her for 18 years. Freed, she stands straight and praises God. So what's wrong with this picture? For the leader of the synagogue, this transformation occurs at the wrong time. Jesus is working on the Sabbath—and in doing so, disrupting the regular activities of the synagogue.

It is easy to be horrified at a religious leader who becomes indignant because Jesus cures on the Sabbath. How could he be so heartless, so absorbed by religious concerns that he misses the chance to delight in a miracle? He is committed to protecting distinctive characteristics of tradition and identity, but is he also trying to contain a God of love and grace by confining God's mercy and power to appropriate times and recipients? Is he a little too worried about his own interests so that, in the end, he tramples both the poor and the Sabbath?

A daughter of the covenant has been restored. By his words and action, Jesus places a socially invisible, physically broken woman in the center of the tradition that the synagogue leader is trying to preserve. Jesus calls the woman a daughter of Abraham, but the religious leader is indignant. Although comfortable about rescuing a farm animal on the Sabbath, he has trouble rejoicing when a bound woman is freed. But for Jesus, Isaiah, the woman and the crowd, the healing of the broken does not distract from delighting in the Sabbath, because it is a way of delighting in God.

It wasn't wrong for the leader to want to protect the Sabbath day and worship from intrusions of regular work. But in the context of this miracle, the leader appears silly and shriveled; being indignant at mercy and goodness looks ridiculous. What is missing is a delight in God's mercy, in Jesus' power, in the Sabbath, in a restored sister. In attempting to protect what was holy, the leader misses a transforming encounter with Jesus, the Holy One. And in trying to protect the holy, he sees the broken woman as an intrusion.

Do we become indignant when God's moves catch us by surprise? Are we in danger of confusing our interests with God's? Do we see a needy person as one more

interruption or as a child of God longing for freedom, restoration or healing? Do we trample the poor by protecting our piety from them or by always being busy with “more important” things?

Have our delight and our rest in God been crowded out by other concerns? It is certainly easy to make ourselves and our interests the focus of worship—our feelings, experience, needs, even our growth. But worship is our corporate delight in God’s acts and character, our response to God’s grace and goodness. Psalm 103 and Hebrews 12 remind us of the centrality of gratitude in worship—the importance of remembering God’s many benefits and delighting in the One who forgives, heals and redeems.