

When I take Otto to Sequanota he is mostly free range, because his separation anxiety keeps him from going too far for too long. So the other week when we walked past the elementary campfire, since he wasn't on a leash, he took a little detour to where they had all their cookout ingredients, including raw hotdogs. But while everyone was busy shooing him away, the program director's dog, Arlo, who is maybe half Otto's size, took advantage of the diversion and stole and ate one of the campers' hotdogs, fully cooked, in a bun, with ketchup. I say this first as a warning, since we're going to be eating in a little while, but also as an illustration: sometimes we get distracted—even distracted by things that make good sense to us—so we miss the more immediate or more important things that God is calling us to do.

Today's gospel is one of several stories where Jesus caused trouble on the Sabbath. As modern Christians and especially as modern American Christians, we have lost the sense of Sabbath that Jesus and his contemporaries would have shared. You probably have to be at least my age to remember when the difference between Sunday and every other day of the week was more than stores closing at six or seven at night as opposed to nine or 10. But when I spent a January term in Geneva, the birthplace of Calvinism, we still had to take the bus to the airport to find an open restaurant or even a convenience store so we could eat on Sundays. After a few Sabbaths in the Holy Land I learned to avoid the Sabbath elevator—the one that stops on every floor so that you don't have to push the buttons, because electronics create a spark, and since God did not create on the seventh day, we're not supposed to either.

Our culture may not do much to observe the Sabbath, and some other cultures' Sabbath practices may seem to us excessively strict or unnecessarily inconvenient, but that misses the point. God gifted the Sabbath to the people of Israel at the beginning of their independence. When they were enslaved in Egypt, making bricks without straw, they never got a day off. The rest of the nations around them that lived, as they did, at the very edge of subsistence, never took a day off. Yet God commanded the people to act as God had—taking a break after six days of work. I read recently that we humans are mammals, evolved to be at the top of the food chain, like other predators. We're made to behave like lions—hunting, eating, and then napping until we get hungry for another gazelle. Yet we behave like we're at the bottom of the food chain—in never-ending industry like ants; in fact, we even write fables congratulating ourselves for acting that way. But the God in whose image we were created modeled for us the importance of periodic freedom from work—and gave us the Sabbath to teach us to trust God to meet our needs, instead of trusting in our own over-work ethic.

But perhaps the most radical part of the Sabbath commandment was that Sabbath included everyone—men, women, and children, servants and slaves, foreign visitors, even

livestock. Sabbath was a truly democratizing gift to everyone—not an opportunity to create a serving class that supported the leisure of others. That is one aspect of Sabbath that we have definitely lost: When I stop at Sheetz to pick up breakfast, which I do almost every Sunday, I’m failing to observe the Sabbath, because someone else is working so that I can run out of the house without having cooked my own breakfast. But rightly observed, Sabbath is a gift of holy rest for the whole community.

So when we read about Sabbath in scripture, and particularly the specific rules that fleshed out that commandment, it’s important we remember that the religious authorities, like this leader of the synagogue, were endeavoring to help people more fully experience God’s gift of Sabbath—not inventing arbitrary restrictions for the sake of making rules. And it’s also important to remember that Jesus said, in Matthew’s gospel, that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So in this and other Sabbath stories, Jesus is not ignoring or invalidating the Sabbath. But Jesus also said in our gospel reading last week, that he came not to bring peace but division—and almost everything Jesus does on the Sabbath ends up being divisive.

I’m not saying Jesus healed this woman to purposely cause an argument; but at the very least, he seems not to have cared if an argument ensued. The woman didn’t beg for healing the way other characters in the gospels did; Jesus called to her. And although Jesus healed at other times by merely speaking, in this case he touched her—which would certainly have drawn more attention to the situation. The leader of the synagogue had a point: if healing is considered work, and work is not to be done on the Sabbath, then pick any other day of the week for healing. But the religious expert—and make no mistake, in this story, the religious expert is us—the religious expert was so distracted by the rules humans had authored to protect the Sabbath that he missed the spirit of freedom in which God created the Sabbath.

Sabbath was one of the ways God liberated the people of Israel from slavery. As Jesus points out, the woman had been enslaved for 18 years by her debilitating condition; what could better reflect the spirit of Sabbath liberation than for her to be set free that day? So we have to ask ourselves: what are the rules that we have written—however well-intentioned—that undermine God’s abundant provision and liberating work in the world? In what ways have we said, “Come back some other day” to those seeking the justice, mercy, and compassion that Christ has called us to practice? May we never oppose the healing God is working in our world; and may we not only rejoice but participate in the liberating work of the kingdom—not in the future, when it’s convenient, or according to the rules of our timelines, but whenever God calls to us through those in need.