

*Ora et labora*. To work is to pray. This is the motto of the Order of St. Benedict. And boy does this multitasker love this idea. How great. All of my business, the never ending to-do lists, even the laundry - all of it now counts as prayer too!

But as today is Sunday (typically seen as the Sabbath day or day of rest in our tradition) and as tomorrow is Labor Day) - a federal holiday where we are encouraged to put down our labors - perhaps we should consider - could it also be said that to Sabbath is to pray, to rest is to pray. In consideration of this question I'd like to share a story from one of my favorite collections by Gellman and deMajo. No Lists on the Sabbath!

I know you wish you could have lived in the Garden of Eden. I know. Great weather, no problems, good food. But believe me when I tell you that the Garden of Eden was no piece of cake, because Adam lived there, and Adam was a list maker. In fact, Adam was the worst list maker of all time. The elephant woke up one morning to find his trunk stuck through a huge leaf on which Adam had written in berry ink,

Elephant list for today:

1. Dump all the broken branches outside the garden.
2. Hose down the dirty dishes.
3. Squash some coconuts for lunch.

The monkey woke up one morning to find a banana peel tied around its tail on which Adam had written in berry ink,

Monkey list for today:

1. Dump rotten fruit outside the garden
2. Pick bananas for supper
3. Don't eat the bananas you pick for supper.

Come morning, almost every animal woke up with a list, and all day long Adam would scurry around checking up on the animals and pestering them to see how they were coming with their lists.

One day the animals got together and said to God, "This guy Adam is such a pest! Can't you move us out of here? Or better yet, can't you move him out of here?"

God said, "Wait for the Sabbath. There are no lists on the Sabbath."

On the morning of the seventh day Adam woke up bright and early to make his lists. He went to get his berry ink pot to write out a list for the elephant, but the ink was dry. "No problem." Adam said. "I will just go out and pick some more berries for the inkwell." But when Adam came to the berry patch, all the berries were gone.

"Not to worry," Adam said "I will scratch out my lists for all the animals in the sand on the beach." Adam took a stick and started writing lists in the wet sand. But a wave came along and erased all the lists. Adam thought this was very strange, because the Garden of Eden was near a river. He had never before seen a wave that big in the river.

So Adam sat down to rest. (pause) And he felt good just resting. (Pause)Then the monkey came by. "No lists on the Sabbath!" he chirped. The elephant came by and trumpeted, "No lists on the Sabbath!" And the animals all wished Adam a good day of rest.

Pause

He felt good just resting. Was this perhaps the first time Adam did something restorative for himself, was this the first act of self-care, of self-compassion. I like to imagine that in those moments of rest Adam looked around, at the elephants rolling joyfully in the mud, at the monkeys swinging excitedly through the trees, at the birds gliding peacefully through the air - and he recognized that these creatures were not put on the planet simply to check things off a to do list, but that in simply living, whether working or resting, they were a blessed part of the garden, part of the beauty of creation. So perhaps this moment of rest, and self-compassion, led to compassion towards the others.

May this be what Sabbath is about for us, taking a time to rest, to offer oneself the gift of self-care, but also to open our eyes to those around us who are also worthy of compassion and rest, mercy and love.

Today's scripture passage, Matthew 12:1-8 describes a scene in which the disciples of Jesus are plucking grain on the Sabbath and the Pharisees accuse Jesus of failing to keep right with the Law. Because keeping the sabbath was so important it got spot #3 on Moses Top 10 Commandments. Later in Exodus God tells Moses "For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death." So yes, this was a really big deal.

But Jesus understands the heart of the matter. As is the case in so many of these stories he's able to see through the letter of the law to the love of God underneath. Yes, rest is important. It is a very "Jesus" thing to stand the entire economic system on its head, to force the machines of production to stop grinding for a moment so that instead we might - say - consider the lilies of the field or speak with a woman at a well. Sabbath does this. Sabbath is a means of giving to ourselves, of re-filling the cup, of making the time for mercy and compassion. It is an act of love and care - from God to us, from us to ourselves, and from ourselves outward to the whole world.

But if you're starving, mercy is in the eating - and the work it takes to fill the belly. And if your neighbor is starving, mercy is in the feeding. And if you have healing and love to offer the world, mercy is in the sharing. Seven days a week. On that Sabbath Day in the field perhaps it was Sabbath enough, table turning radical love enough for Jesus to say - gather the gleanings and be fed - I'll deal with the fallout. And he does, all the way to the cross and beyond. This passage ends with the religious elite so scandalized by this notion of mercy being more important than the letter of the law, that they began to plot against Jesus.

So, this Labor Day may we take a Sabbath rest and take the time to look around at others who deserve mercy and rest and compassion. No matter what work you do, at home, in the office, at school, for money, or without compensation - whatever you work at, you are also part of a system that depends on the work of others. We came to see that clearly in the earliest months of the pandemic when we relied so heavily on the labors of frontline and essential workers. And in recent days when treatment of workers of all kinds has at times been appalling. The dignity and rights of workers must be protected. People above profits. And so we are called as justice seekers, as Jesus followers, to do what is in our strength to ensure every person has productive work, a fair living wage, safe working conditions, the freedom to organize and join unions, and the right to take a break and rest. Sabbath may be a day of rest, but it is not a day off from working for justice and mercy for all people.

Let us keep the Sabbath that God truly wants, a time apart to remember that undergirding all our work to build a beautiful world with God is a deep love for creation. May this Labor Day open you up more fully to love for yourself and for the world around you. And then when the day of rest is over, may you be strengthened to start the work anew.