

Rules. We live by them, and die by them. Rules make the world go around, or so it seems. We have rules to tell us what to wear, what we should and shouldn't eat, how to behave, where to park our cars and how to drive them: nearly everything we do has one rule or another about it. I remember reading an article in my hometown paper when I was in high school about ridiculous and pointless laws still on the books in Virginia. My favorite (and the only one I remember) was the law prohibiting eating pickles in Norfolk on Sundays. Pickle-eating on any other day appears to be fine, but not on Sundays, at least not in Norfolk.

Here are some other silly laws from other places:

In Pennsylvania, the penalty for cursing is a forty-cent fine. However, if God is mentioned in the curse, the fine is sixty-seven cents.

It is illegal to mispronounce the name of the city of Joliet, Illinois.

In Utah, the law requires that daylight be seen between two dancing partners.

In San Francisco, you are not permitted to carry a basket suspended from a pole.

It is unlawful for goldfish to ride on a Seattle, Washington, bus unless they lie still.

In Natchez, Mississippi, it is against the law for elephants to drink beer.

An old Hollywood, California, ordinance forbids driving more than two thousand sheep down Hollywood Boulevard at one time.

In Muncie, Indiana, you cannot bring fishing tackle into a cemetery.

The California penal code prohibits the shooting of any animal, except a whale, from an automobile.

In Joliet, Illinois, women are not allowed to try on more than six dresses in one store.

Laws and rules, even though we grumble about them and make fun of them, are important. They represent someone's attempt to do the right thing, to protect something they value, and that they believe should be a community value. They are not inherently good or evil: they are a means to help preserve a way of living. Rules help us live together.

Part of what makes civilization (nations and states, cities and towns, communities and neighborhoods and even churches) work is that we organize our lives on rules that we agree to, more or less mutually. These are basic principles that we consider to be moral, or right, or just common decency:

don't steal, don't destroy someone else's property, be kind to one another, play nice, use your napkin, show respect to your elders, don't talk over someone, don't chew with your mouth open, "If you can't say nothin' nice, don't say nothin' at all" (Peter Cottontail's mother's rule). All these "rules," whether enforced by law or by mother, are aimed at helping us live together better.

And who makes the rules? Essentially, we do.

We make them, when we decide and act on our idea of how things should be. For example, let me pick on casual sandals. Flip Flops. We called them thongs when I was a child, before that word came to mean something else entirely. I do not wear them myself, not because I have anything against them, but because I tend to fall down while wearing them, which is both embarrassing and irrelevant. Call it trivia.

In the last year or two, flip flops have moved from being beach wear, as they were when I was a child, to being considered appropriate to wear almost everywhere. We wouldn't even wear them to the mall when I was little, but now everyone wears them everywhere; there are styles of flip flops for all kinds of occasions. At one wedding I did last year on the beach, the entire wedding party wore flip-flops, and it was about the cutest thing I've ever seen; the guys wore leather, and the girls had sequins and trim:

formal flip flops. Somewhere along the line, we collectively decided that that is okay; that we could value comfort and yes, style, over “traditional” formality. And when someone seated near you whispers that they “just can’t believe” someone would wear “those things” around town, you’re trying to make your own rule based on how you think the world ought to be. That’s how rules work: one way or another, we make them. And when enough people disagree with a rule, it gradually gets changed. Flip flops: they’re not just for the beach anymore.

So we come to this story, which is unique to John’s gospel, of a sick man who had been trying, for thirty-eight years, to get healed. Now here’s a rules question for us: what’s the name of this place? In some Bible versions it’s called Beth-zatha, in others, Beth-saida, and in some, Bethesda, which we seem to think is a good name for a place of healing. If the rule by which we read scripture says that every word has to be literally and factually true, we have to wonder how much attention we should pay to this story when we’re not exactly sure what the name is. Or we have to ask if that’s an appropriate rule.

Another question is how the healing waters worked. Most manuscripts say that sometimes the water was stirred up, and that’s when healing took place. A few say that an angel stirred the waters for healing,

but it's not in the oldest and most authoritative sources. Do we leave it out or include it? Many experts agree that the verse about the angel was added to the story later, as a way of explaining how the waters might have been stirred up and made beneficial for healing—but we don't know. And I wonder how important it really is? But the rule for such things tends to be that the oldest manuscripts are those closest in time to the actual events, and therefore are more likely to be accurate, and this means that the fourth verse of this chapter does not appear in the main text of many Bibles.

What we know is that this place--Beth-saida, Beth-zatha, Bethesda, whatever we call it—was a place where people went to “take the waters,” much as they've done for centuries in hot springs or mineral springs. Our mountain communities have a number of such places, and here in the East (sort of), Seven Springs was once home to (of course) seven springs of mineral-rich water that were famous for promoting health. Perhaps that's enough for us to know: that here, healings were reported to take place, and there was hope enough for this man to keep trying, even after long years of disappointment.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem for one of the festivals of his Jewish faith, along with many others, and while there happened to pass by the pool of Bethzatha. Among the people waiting there for the stirring of the

water, he encountered this man and asked him a question for which he already knew the answer. We know the answer, too. “Do you want to be made well?” To use the vernacular, “well, duh!” Of course he did; he had been waiting for thirty-eight years for his chance. But there is more to Jesus’ question than meets the eye.

“Do you want to be made well?” goes beyond simply giving him back his physical health, beyond simply giving him the strength to take up his mat and walk. In the Bible, healing is connected to salvation—and they both translate to being made well, or made whole. Jesus was not only asking the man if he wanted to be free of his illness, he was asking—offering—him a new, whole life. Later, when Jesus met the man again in the temple, he acknowledged his new wholeness and reminded him that because he was healed in both body and soul, he should not sin. And it was that healing that made it all possible for him. We so often pray for someone to get well from an illness or injury, and we are often unaware of what we can and should be asking: for wholeness, for complete healing, for a renovation, a renewing, of body and spirit in Christ. This is a tremendous gift!

Unfortunately, it was not a gift the Pharisees were able to appreciate. You remember what I said earlier about rules: we make the rules,

generally, by which our behavior is measured, and we make them to preserve the things that we value. To give you another example, we set aside handicapped parking spaces for those who need them, because we value that kindness to others. It is important to us that people be able to get around, and if setting aside some parking spaces can help them, we are willing to do it. In addition, because we value helping people retain their mobility and independence, we are willing not only to set aside the space, but also to enforce it with parking tickets and expensive fines. We make rules like this to help us to live together.

The Pharisees were the guardians of the community rules in Israel. They believed that following every rule handed down by the prophets and the rabbis would earn them the favor of God, and that breaking these rules, or laws, would deny them God's favor. And so they did literally everything in their power to abide by the rules. It was offensive to them to see such an obvious violation of the Sabbath rules against work as the man whom Jesus had made well carrying his bedding away from the pool. They themselves were such strict practitioners of the rules that they would not even walk too far on the Sabbath, because they believed that beyond a certain number of steps, it ceased to be a necessary activity and became work: and they would never work on a Sabbath. When they confronted the

man, he told them that the man who healed him told him to take up his mat and walk, so he did, but Jesus had left and he was unable to point him out in the crowd. He doesn't appear even to have known Jesus' name, but he knew all he needed to about who Jesus was: his healer, his salvation. And to him, his healing and his obedience to the one who brought him God's healing was a higher value than strict observance of the Sabbath on that particular day.

When he and Jesus met later in the temple, the man pointed Jesus out to the Pharisees, who chastised Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. For all that one might understand healing to be an appropriate act of compassion, apparently this was work, as well, and forbidden, and it gave them an excuse, as John says, to begin to persecute Jesus.

Now before we get down on the Pharisees, let's think about the rules, and who made the rules. God handed down some commandments about how to live together, and how to live the life God calls God's people to live. That's the origin of the rules. And as we look at the laws of the Old Testament, we see so many that are clearly about how to live healthy, whole lives together. But the Pharisees followed many other laws that were not given by God, and lived and made rules that were made not to protect the value of living in community, but to protect the value of doing everything

just right, and doing what they thought would please God. This would seem to be a noble virtue, but it caused them to run into trouble with Jesus, who held to a higher value.

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus over breaking the law by healing on the Sabbath, he answered them by saying, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” This was the ultimate breaking of the rules to them, for in it they heard Jesus blasphemously claim to be equal to God. This was heresy of the worst sort to them, and their persecution began in earnest, according to John, in response to this. Again, they were protecting the rules, and their rules said that God was so holy that almost no one could use God’s name (ever) and that no one could claim too close a relationship to God. By their understanding, a proper distance between God and follower made the system work. But Jesus had a different idea about the rules, and what values they should protect, and how people might live.

To Jesus, what was more important than strict adherence to a bunch of rules designed to keep everything the same was living a life that was full of the presence and power of God. So when Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he wasn’t flaunting a rule about keeping the Sabbath holy, even though the Pharisees thought he was. Instead, he was modeling a life that is

consistent with his own values, with God's values, of mercy, grace and compassion. If that conflicted with the Pharisees' understanding of how to earn God's favor, I think Jesus might have said, "so be it." And so it was.

Jesus came to introduce people to a whole new way of life, a way of life that was not characterized by rules and the silly absurdities that the over-legislation of our day to day lives can produce. Jesus might have eaten pickles in Norfolk, Virginia on Sunday if that was what was there to eat. He certainly performed other miraculous healings on the Sabbath, according to the Gospels, and proclaimed himself Lord of the Sabbath. But it was not a new set of rules he came to teach us, but new life that he came to give.

It is that same new life that we strive to live every day, a life that is not legislated moment by moment and breath by breath, but instead a life that is set free from rules for grace. Jesus said that God is still moving in the world, and can't be constrained by silly rules. And Jesus himself still moves in our hearts and lives, and it is not for us to make rules about how he does it. It is not for us to decide who is in the kingdom and who is out. It is not for us to decide who is acceptable and who is not. It is not for us to decide whom to treat with kindness, and whom to pass by with indifference. These

decisions are not ours anymore, when we have come to know God, to call ourselves Christian, to live with God's Holy Spirit with us every day.

A larger miracle happened there by that pool, whatever its name was, that day Jesus passed by. It was bigger than just restoring one man to health and wholeness. It was bigger than the Pharisees' offense at the breaking of the rules. It was bigger than carrying your bedding on the Sabbath, or obeying every dotted I and crossed T of the rules. It was so big, in fact, that Jesus blew the rules right out of the water, and offered to all who would hear and be changed a new way of living. If we let this new way of life take root in our hearts, then it won't matter if you see someone wearing flip flops where you think they shouldn't—because you'll see them with the same love God has for them and for you, and we'll be able, finally, to worry less about how someone looks or even acts, and more about the person inside the skin, beside their behavior. It might not even matter if you eat a pickle in Norfolk this afternoon, or mispronounce the name of Joliet, Illinois, or if your goldfish won't lie still on the bus in Seattle, Washington.

What matters in that God was in Jesus that day, and God is in us today in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Who makes the rules? We do, and God in us. May we make them wisely, and well, and whole, and may others see God in them and in us. Thanks be to God.