My great-grandfather, Willem Suk, died 111 years ago, in 1909, just in his mid-forties. He was a poor man who made a living selling groceries out of a dog cart. I am pretty sure this is a picture of him, his dogs and his cart, in 1902 or 1903.

Willem, unlike most people in his little village, never went to church. But he married a woman, Jantje Smit, who was very pious, and who belonged to a very strict Calvinist congregation.

My grandfather was just six or seven when his dad died, soon after this picture was taken. But one thing my grandfather remembered about his dad is that he would needle his pious wife by sending one of their children to the tobacco store, “*op Zondag!”* (on Sundays) to buy his weekly five-cent cigar.

Jantje, his wife, hated this, because she believed that the Sabbath was supposed to be a day when no one worked: not your son or daughter, not your horse or donkey, and not even the clerk in the cigar store.

By now, we have mostly given up on such rules—rules like those illustrated by this old painting, where John Calvin and his wife (I think) are looking on, disapprovingly, at some Sabbath breakers playing golf.

We’ve mostly given up on these kind of stifling Sabbath rules. After all, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath.” The Apostle Paul said—I’m giving you the sense of the passage--“let no one judge you for how you keep the sabbath.” And historically, this painting actually has it wrong. John Calvin would not have objected to a Sunday golf game. In fact, on Sundays Calvin himself often went lawn bowling or sailing on lake Geneva.

So, even if we are ready to shrug our shoulders and laugh at the legalism of past generations, what are we to make of this command, then, the longest of the ten?

20:8Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

What do we make of this command? Well, consider this story about Juneteenth.

Back in 1862, two years before the birth of my great-grandfather the dog-cart salesman, President Lincoln declared the end of slavery in America. But of course, a Civil War was going on, and in the Deep South, many slaves did not know about the Declaration.

So, it was that in June 1865, just after the war’s end, General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston with 2,000 Northern troops to occupy Texas. And on June 19—Juneteenth—he read aloud the Emancipation Proclamation.

Well, you can guess what happened. For many, many days after, the former Texan slaves celebrated their freedom. How? Well, they picnicked. And they sang and danced. And they partied in the streets. And, most importantly for our purposes, they stopped working. They threw off their chains, and threw down the hoes, and they took a holiday because work isn’t everything, or even the main thing, when it comes to living the good the life.

Sabbath is not just about mere rest. Both the ancient Jews and the emancipated slaves knew this. In Deuteronomy 5, where Moses once more lists the ten commands, the Israelites are told to take a Sabbath rest not because God rested, but because they must:

“Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

So here is the heart of what I want to say. The Sabbath is not merely keeping legalistic prohibitions we ought to follow to stay right with God. No, the Sabbath is about an ideal a whole nation was invited to pursue. It is the same ideal celebrated with partying and rest on Juneteenth by American, the ideal of liberation from all forms of oppression and want, for anyone, always.

Look, most of us are very, very privileged—or, as some would put it, blessed. We can take rest for granted. Many of us own cottages, or time shares, or belong to clubs, or . . . . . even own sailboats.

And, when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, many of us will go on vacations all over Canada and around the world. Irene and I will, too.

Sure, some of us work too hard, some of us have sometimes neglected the more important things in life, like family or health, in order to climb the ladder higher or jump a pay grade or two. But that was our choice—we had no slave masters.

Anyway, when we hear this command, whether we work too hard or not, we tend to hear the Exodus version. God rested, so even though work is calling, we think, “I probably should rest too, like God did.”

But not everyone is privileged like most of us are. Some Canadians need the relief promised in the Deuteronomy version of this command. Even now, even here, even though slavery has been outlawed for generations, many of our neighbours do not have the choice to rest or not that we have. They are single mothers—a big concern in the Old Testament, by the way. They may work fifty hours a week to pay the rent and still come up short when it comes to groceries or childcare for their kids.

Not everyone is privileged the way we mostly are. Some of these neighbours are racialized, and have struggled against prejudice their whole lives. Some are immigrants, or foreign workers on whom we depend to farm and put food on our tables or drive us in their taxis or care for our parents in nursing homes.

Some of the oppressed in Canada are the traumatized—whether by military service or childhood abuse—the traumatized who cannot hold a job or maintain a relationship and may then even find themselves homeless.

I could go on, but not everyone is privileged like we are, and very few of these people can sing and dance in the streets whenever they want, like we can.

And for the sake of people such as this, people at the center of the Old Testament’s legal concerns, Moses says the Sabbath is going to be an Israelite government program to offer rest from oppression for all struggling marginalized people, to liberate them, to care for them, whether or not their troubles are of their own making or not.

What’s more, the fourth command is just the beginning. Many of the rest of the commands in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and Numbers go into great depth on what the full liberation program requires: things like rest for fields that are overworked and animals that are ready to drop. The ancient Israelites were to leave crops in the field for the poor to harvest, were required to forgive debts and return land lost in bad deals every few years, and to care for widows, orphans, refugees, foreigners, and the poor always.

To repeat, then. The Sabbath is not merely about legalistic rules. No, the Sabbath is about an ideal, an ideal the whole nation of Israel was invited to pursue. It is the ideal of liberation from all forms of oppression and want for everyone all the time.

And the seventh day rest was a symbol of this freedom from oppression, a little taste now of what that nation was striving for always, in all of its customs and laws and neighbourhoods.

I love Canada. I love Canada partly because I have lived elsewhere, and have experienced on a very personal level what it means to live in places without healthcare for all, like the Philippines or in the USA.

I love Canada, partly because I have lived the good life here, full of opportunity, and civil order, and good neighbours, and strong institutions and a generous safety net.

I love Canada because it welcomes foreigners and refugees, provides pensions for the elderly, and a working infrastructure for the rest of us. We are not yet there, but we might well be on the way.

Back in my great grandfather’s day, the Netherlands was a poor nation. It offered its needy citizens nothing but want and neglect. Ironically, the only way my great grandfather’s family could keep enough food on the table was through the charity of his wife’s church, the church he rejected. But, he smoked his weekly cigar, at least, on a full stomach. If you look closely, he’s got a cigar in this, his and Jantje’s wedding picture, too. He wasn’t much for church, but he loved his cigars.

Here in Canada, we’re doing a lot better than my great grandparents did. But for the least and the last, for any and all oppressed by racism or poverty or mental illness or sexism . . . we need to keep it up. For the sake of our neighbour’s Sabbaths, we can do even better. It’s a personal ideal we can all strive for in our public, corporate, and political lives.