

October 4, 27A (Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20)

Rules help us sustain life in community, whether we like it or not.

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue

When I was a kid I got into a fair amount of trouble. I've spent time in the corner (time-out's ancestor), I've been grounded from playing outside, and like many in my generation, I have even heard the words "Go get the paddle."

But nothing ever filled me with more dread than "Wait until your father gets home."

Sometimes I think this dread of a looming, punishing father is why some Christians don't like to spend a lot of time in the Old Testament. And to hang out at the foundation of all of the rules, the Ten Commandments, can seem downright oppressive.

But time spent in the Old Testament reveals the God of grace and love also found in the New Testament. The commandments are law; they are laws of love that help us to be in community.

In order to be community, we need rules. Without rules there is chaos, and people get hurt. To be sure, people get hurt even with rules, but usually that's because we ignore the rules or we disagree about them or we don't like someone else's interpretation of them. (Please, wear your face mask.)

God's beloved children keep making a mess out of ten very simple rules. These rules are so simple that Jesus summarizes them by citing just two Old Testament commandments. Tablet 1: *Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength.* How? By loving God above all gods, by not worshiping idols, by not taking the Lord's name in vain, and by honoring the Sabbath. Tablet 2: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* How? Honor your elders. Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or

covet. The Ten Commandments, with their intimidating weight, are just these two commandments in more detail.

My sister and I share an affinity for office supplies. Once we were discussing calendars, and she pulled out the most beautiful, shiny organizational helpmate I've ever seen: the Planner Pad.

I immediately broke commandment no. 10—I wanted it so very badly. She showed me how it listed activities by categories that then funneled down into daily things to do and those funneled down to appointments—the most necessary things that need to be accomplished.

Moses brings down from Mount Sinai two prefilled Planner Pads. On them appear the to do's and, in a slight twist, the to don'ts. And those funnel down to the most necessary things: Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.

The foundation of who we are is our obedience to and love of God. Once that relationship is in place, it is time to turn to our relationship with those around us. How do we sustain life in community?

Every community has rules. What are the rules in your family? How many of them are written down? *Thou shalt eat what's put in front of you. Thou shalt not interrupt Grandpa, no matter how many times you've heard the story. Aunt Miriam always brings the apple pies.*

What are the unwritten rules for our children's sports teams? *Don't coach from the sidelines. Don't mess with the team Mom. Don't bring deviled eggs to an all-day tournament in the summer.*

How about in our faith communities? *Thou shalt clap your hands to music only if it's Pentecost or the children's choir is singing. Thou shalt not sit in the very front pew unless it's Easter and you couldn't find a parking spot. Thou shalt be welcoming.*

The Israelites had far more rules than the Ten Commandments. They needed them to keep a tight, healthy, long-lasting community. Many of those rules make less sense to us in our contemporary context. A faith community's rules are based on context, and sometimes they need to shift when the context changes.

We are all living in a time of contextual change right now. I've lost count of how many unwritten rules for our community of faith will look totally different if and when we get together in person again. The unwritten rule that the offering plates don't cross the center aisle? Gone—no more offering plates passed. The unwritten rule that real ministry can't be done online? Gone. The unwritten rule that only certain people sit in specific spots? Gone—hello, social distancing.

It feels like everything has changed—and yet the most important things have not. Stick with the top ten, and then go from there.

We worship together as communities of faith not because we are perfect at the rules but because we hold onto the faithful knowledge that God's grace and love are what unite us—not the rules. We are going to disagree. We are going to disappoint. We are going to break the rules.

And so we hold one another up, we unite in our love for God and in God's returned love for us, and we remain community in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Love God—no other gods, no idols. Don't take the Lord's name in vain, and remember the sabbath. Love your neighbor—honor your elders. Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet.

It's that simple.