My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Lenten bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

When we were kids we can fairly say that we would get into a fair amount of trouble. I’ve spent time in my room (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. It brings up images of Charlton Heston up there on the mountain with a big, bass-voiced, unseeable God that seems to only be speaking with balls of fire that barely miss us. The God of Hollywood growing up wasn’t snuggly.

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. And in order to be community, we need rules. Without rules there is chaos, and people get hurt. Traffic laws are a good example of rules that are good for us and for which we expect voluntary compliance. Now, 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. In our pandemic, a simple request, or even a Governor’s order to ‘please, wear a face mask’ is a good example of how folks both disagree with a simple rule and might even ignore it, to the detriment of themselves and others by spreading the COVID-19 virus more readily than might otherwise occur.

But we know that however we mis-behave God loves us anyway, and we are God’s chosen children, aren’t we? And like kids, God’s beloved children keep making a mess out of ten very simple rules. These rules are so simple that Jesus summarized them by citing just two Old Testament commandments. Remember them? If we were to envision Moses bringing two tablets down from Mt Sinai it they might read like this.

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.

No one will ever accuse me of being Mr. Digital. I enjoy the idea of having hard-copy organizers for all my papers, both churchy and personal. But I really understood how digitizing can be more useful when my wife showed me some of her electronic tools provided by her employer, including an app called “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.

It's that easy. Two things. And it’s that hard. Two things.

The foundation of who we are is in our obedience to, and love for, God. Once that relationship is in place, it is time to turn to our relationship with those around us. The Bible calls those around us, in this particular Exodus scripture, our “neighbors”. We expand that a little bit, and these days we ask ourselves about life in community. How do we sustain it, and even make it thrive?

Let’s think about this. Every community has rules. What are the rules in your family, either growing up or now? How many of them were, or are, written down? In my house growing up, one of the rules was, “Thou shalt eat what’s put in front of you.” How about, “Thou shalt not interrupt Grandpa, no matter how many times you’ve heard the story.” Or how about, “Aunt Jasmine always brings the pies.” These are the unwritten rules that everyone only has to break once to know that it should always, always be that way, right?

What are the unwritten rules for our children’s sports teams? Don’t coach from the sidelines. Don’t mess with the team Mom. And for sure don’t bring tuna salad sandwiches or deviled eggs to an all-day tournament in the summer. Unless you have a Yeti. And I’m not talking about the big snowman.

How about in our faith communities? When I was growing up, it was, ‘Thou shalt clap your hands to music only if it’s Pentecost or the children’s choir is singing.’ Or maybe, ‘Thou shalt not fall asleep in church unless it’s during the sermon.’ You like that one? I do. How about, ‘Thou shalt not sit in the very front pew unless it’s Easter and you couldn’t find a close-in parking spot.’ Ever been to a place where you were left wandering around, with lots of folks talking in groups and you feeling left out? How about, ‘Thou shalt be welcoming’, because we’re here for more than just seeing our friends during coffee hour. We don’t do that, do we?

Now, the ancient Israelites had far more rules than the Ten Commandments. They developed them as rites of holiness that gave a unity on what was good before God and what was not, and it gave them a tight, healthy, long-lasting community. Many of those rules you can find in Leviticus and involve dietary restrictions, and they 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’re living in a time of contextual change right now. 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—electronic giving means we may not have offering plates passed any longer. The unwritten rule that real ministry can’t be done online? Gone—I think our broadcast services are here to stay. The unwritten rule that only certain people sit in specific spots? Gone—hello, social distancing. And we have losses to grieve as well, for those who have died and those who have left, and we didn’t have a chance to hug goodbye.

It feels like everything has changed—and yet the most important things have not. Stick with the top ten (which are really the top two) given in our scripture, 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 have a new website which says that to the world, and an offset heart and cross as symbols of who we are. So who are we? We’re still finding out. But I can say a few things about who we are…we are going to disagree. We are going to disappoint. We are going to break the rules.

I hope you see that reflected in the Corinthians scripture today, too. Just like us today, what Paul says about them is that they have recognized both the written and unwritten rules of God and God’s people, and it’s way different than what worldly rewards will ever recognize. They call themselves fools for God, because they are so different it will be hard to know how to ever understand the world’s ways again. And Paul knows they’ll fail in their efforts. But fools often do, and that’s ok, because by releasing their pride and ego in the world, it frees them to do God’s real work.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

God’s covenant here is getting specific. But it’s time for that—how will we live, for what will we stand our ground, and to whom shall we pay attention? And what are the unspoken rules that support our values, and how do we make these known to new folks? We try. And Fail. And try, and fail.

But in failing, 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. And we try again. To Love God—no other gods, no idols. To not be like God, and to remember the sabbath. To Love our neighbor— and honor our elders. And also don’t murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. It’s that simple. And it’s that hard. And for that freedom of living and choice, every day I give thanks to God, Amen.