

## **“Rules, Rules, and More Rules”**

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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46

There once was a young paratrooper who was just learning the trade. She was up in an airplane for the first time, and her sergeant, when it was time for the trooper to jump out of the airplane, gave some instructions. The sergeant said to the paratrooper, “There are four rules. One: When I say jump, you need to move to the end of the plane and jump out of it. Number two: Once you're out of the plane, pull the ripcord. Three: If the parachute fails to open, pull the emergency record. And four: When you get down to the ground, find the Jeep that will take you back to the base.”

The paratrooper thought that the rules were easy enough. So she followed rule number one; when the sergeant said to move to the back of the plane and jump, the paratrooper did. As the paratrooper was plummeting towards the earth, she pulled the ripcord. Unfortunately, the parachute didn't open. And so the paratrooper had to enact rule number three; she pulled the emergency ripcord. Unfortunately, that parachute did not open either. And so as the paratrooper was plummeting toward the earth, she said to herself, “Oh, great. And I suppose the Jeep won't be down there either!”

Well, sometimes when we follow the rules in life, it doesn't always work out perfectly, even though we think it should. Today, we're going to be talking about the rules, the rules of life and how they can help us as a church as we move forward together.

Please pray with me. O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen (from W.S.Coffin).

Well, in today's reading from the Book of Exodus, we were given 10 rules, or I should say Moses was given 10 rules that he then gave to the people of Israel. And these 10 rules were foundational for the people. They were part of the original deal that God had made with them. The deal was they would become God's people, no longer Pharaoh's people, and that God would set them free from their bondage and take them to their own land. The people's part of the deal was they had to follow these 10 rules, and this was not negotiable. These were absolutely essential to who they were as a people.

All of these rules that they were given, all 10 of them, were designed to help them relationally. These were rules that guided the relationships people had with God and that the people had with one another. The rules were given so that people had boundaries to help them in their relationships and to increase life and love within those boundaries. Brevard Childs, a long-time professor of Old Testament at Yale University, said this about these commandments: “They serve not only to chart the outer boundary, but to provide positive content for life within the circle of the covenant. The commandments look both outward and inward, they guard us against the way of death and they point to the way of life” [Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1974), 398]. I really like that phrase, they guard against the way of death and they point to the way of life, for that is exactly what these commandments

do, and it is truly what all of God's rules do for us. They point to the way of love and the way of life. These, my friends, are the rules of the vineyard. They were the rules for Israel, and they are rules for those of us gathered together as a people on this day; they are the rules for an expanded vineyard of God that includes the church.

These rules can really be summed up in this: God wants for us more love and more life. It's good for us to have these guidelines, because we know that the journey of life can be quite messy and we need help discerning what it is that God wants for us. It is always whatever leads to more love and life.

Remember the lesson of the paratrooper. Sometimes when we follow the rules just right, things don't work out perfectly. It would be a lot easier if life were simple, if all things were either black or white, but what we really have are many, many different shades of gray. One of the differences between progressive Christians, as we are in the United Church of Christ, and some of the more conservative Christian traditions is that we emphasize that there is an infinite variety of grays and that we are always needing to listen to God's still speaking voice so that we can discern how to live in ways to please God and serve others, whereas our more conservative siblings have more of a black and white approach to things.

Well, you can take the Bible literally and follow the lists of rules in it, but my own experience has led me to believe that this approach won't always work out so well. For we can follow the letter of the law, but in so doing, miss the entire meaning of the law and miss the grace that God provides for us in the rules that we have been provided.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took the law, the law that was given by Moses to the people, and he kicked it up a few notches and said, don't just take this by the letter, but by the spirit. So the instruction to not kill the other, Jesus expanded to this: Don't kill, not even with your words. The restriction that we read against adultery, Jesus expanded to this: Don't commit adultery, even in your thoughts. Jesus kicked up all the teachings of God, making them even more relevant and alive for us at all times and places.

So today we have to ask ourselves, what increases life and love? For whatever increases life and love is the law of God. We need to follow this rule to do whatever increases life and love, because our world needs more life and more love at this moment. We need to see people treat one another with more dignity and civility. Case in point, perhaps you watched the presidential debate earlier in the week. And since I'm already talking about religion, I might as well talk about politics too! What could go wrong? Well, if you did have the pleasure of watching the debate, you saw that there were a lot of interruptions and it was not the most civil conversation between people. In fact, there were 93 interruptions between the two candidates. 71 of these interruptions was by one candidate in particular. I won't tell you who that was in case you haven't watched it yet -- I don't want to be a spoiler. But I imagine you can guess who the chief interrupter was. The debate overall was far from civil; it was far from dignified. It wasn't really a debate at all, but devolved into something of a debacle.

CNN's Jake Tapper described it as a “disgrace” because of its incivility. Truly, it was quite chaotic and pretty ugly. And it happened this way because the characters involved disregarded the rules -- the rules that were designed to protect the conversation and to allow it to be fruitful. Well, it wasn't much of a conversation and it wasn't very fruitful. Sometimes, when you disregard the rules, chaos ensues and it is followed by destruction. This is a good lesson for us: Let it not be this way in God's vineyard.

Let us follow the rules that lead to us treating each other with more civility and with more dignity, because this is God's rule to further life and love among us. Our challenge this day is to continue in life together in ways that increase the dignity of one another and that build and strengthen connections between us, especially between those of us who differ in some ways. Think about the topic of politics that I just brought up and our topic of religion -- you know, the topics that are forbidden, along with discussions about money, at Thanksgiving dinner. Of course, we do this anyway, and all kinds of craziness ensues. Well, we should be mindful of our conversation at the Thanksgiving dinner table and every place, and especially in this place, so that our conversation does not create division.

And another good thing we can keep in mind is to say no to *schadenfreude*. This is a good German word -- and perhaps you've read about this: Merriam-Webster online has said there's been a 30,000 percent increase in people who have been looking up that German word, *schadenfreude*. It means taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune or their suffering. My guess is that the increase in the search for this word is due to the fact that the US president and many around him have become ill with covid-19 (many of whom weren't always following the guidelines related to keeping one another safe by wearing face masks, social distancing, etc.). But I think God calls us to say no to *schadenfreude*. Even towards rule flouters, towards one another, and especially towards those with whom we differ. Remember, God is gracious; we should be gracious. God is merciful; let us be merciful.

This is the way of life and love in the vineyard of God, and let us share this way with the world around us. This, friends, is part of our extravagant welcome. We say here that no matter who you are, whom you love, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Even if you have four legs, you are welcome here! We saw this yesterday as many of us were gathered outside of the church for the Blessing of the Animals. There were 24 humans and a variety of pets: We had a few dogs, Binx the cat, and up in the trees above us were plenty of squirrels, which were wisely staying away from the dogs and the cat. But we were one congregation, one happy congregation. We came from different places. We were different species, even, but we united our voices and our yelps and meows in praise to God! This is who we are: We are people who bring all of God's creatures together, and when we gather as God's children to worship, we do so with a united but diverse voice.

We come from near and far as a worldwide family of God. We celebrate this on this World Communion Sunday, as we gather together with God's current vineyard of over 2.4 billion Christians living around the world, maybe making up about a third of the world's population. We know that we're different in many ways, we worship God in different ways, we follow the rules of God in different ways. But today, we are united -- united in celebrating God's grace, God's mercy, and God's presence in our lives in this gift of Holy Communion.

We are truly one. So this day, dear friends, let us be good vines, producing fruit as God calls us to do, increasing in life and love ourselves, and then sharing life and love with others. Let us be good stewards of God's vineyard as we grow within it. Let us increase life and love, for these are the vineyard rules. May they guide us this day. Amen.