

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Twenty-five years ago, author Robert Fulghum wrote a book entitled, “All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten”. It was immediately a smashing success. The book contained observations and rules such as: Share everything, play fair, don't hit people, put things back where you found them and when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. When practiced these are good rules that help us live together.

Today we are going to focus on the second tablet of the Ten Commandment. These are the commandments that deal with our relationships with our neighbors. These commandments put hands and feet on to the word, “Love.” Whenever we talk about the Ten Commandments, it is a good idea to remind ourselves of some basic truths.

The relationship between God and his people had already been established before God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. God had already chosen the Israelites to be his people. God had moved powerfully to break the chains of slavery and lead the Israelites out of bondage and into the freedom of the Promised Land. This is good news! Our relationship with God has already been established through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and this relationship is not affected by our performance.

God gave us the Ten Commandments out of love. God wants us to experience abundant and free lives. God wants us to experience heaven on earth. The Ten Commandments enable us to do this. The commandments are given in love, for love.

Law, or boundaries, are good. They are needed so that we can be truly free. This is true even if it appears at first to be an oxymoron. Both children and parents can experience more freedom if the children play in a fenced in back yard than if they were allowed to go anywhere. Imagine what life would

be like without laws. Life would not be safe, freedom would be an illusion, and anarchy would reign.

It appears to be a human tendency to make laws upon laws. We follow that idea that more laws will help us do fewer bad things and more good things. Often that isn't what happens. The Bible contains many stories where more laws thwarted the expression of God's love and grace. The fourth commandment instructs children to honor their fathers and mothers. By the time of Jesus, though, laws had been made to get around that law. Evidently, there were some children who did not want to care for their aging parents. The adult children were able to designate the portion of their belongings that they would have used to care for their parents as “Corban,” a gift to God. Doing so allowed them to avoid the responsibility of caring for their parents (Mark 7:11).

Several times Jesus ran against the established religious laws because he healed people on the Sabbath. Jesus demonstrated that the love and care of others is more important than keeping the letter of the law.

Not to be undone, we establish laws both officially and unofficially that limit our ability (or desire) to live the Ten Commandments. We know that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we also tell ourselves and our children not to talk to strangers, or pick up hitchhikers. It is permissible to help others, but only when they deserve such help, have the proper documents, are deemed not to be a burden to society, and when our help will initiate a lasting change.

I am not advocating that we act without thinking or foolishly. I am saying that it is important for us to be aware of the additional laws and rules by which we live and be critical of these rules in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of the amazing things about the Ten Commandments is that they don't go into detail. They tell us to honor our parents, but the commandment

doesn't tell us how we can best accomplish this. We are told not to murder—to respect life. Once again, though, we are not told specific ways that we can carry out this commandment.

Martin Luther expanded the application of the Ten Commandments in his Small Catechism's explanation of them. For example, for the fifth commandment, “Though Shalt not Kill,” Luther writes, “We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.” The commandment is expanded from “Don't” to include also, “Do.”

Let's take the commandments a step further. The prophet Jeremiah proclaims, “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). We have been filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of our baptism. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. As Christians our lives are not directed by a set of written laws, but rather by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and our call is to be faithfully obedient to that guidance. Laws that are written on our hearts, allow us to be fantastically creative in our incorporating the Ten Commandments in our lives. As we live with our neighbors we are guided by the law and also set free by the Spirit.

So often we turn the Ten Commandments in upon ourselves. We either use them to support our claims to righteousness, or they point out our individual failings and need for God's love and grace. The emphasis of the Ten Commandments, though, is not on us as individuals, but on our life together with others and how we can share God's love and grace and together live in God's kingdom. Amen