

Playing games with children is an interesting experience. Say you are playing Chutes and Ladders and you say, "When you throw the dice and it shows a two, you can only move your token two places." "But why?" might be the response. "Because that's the rule of the game." So you play some more, and then you say, "You landed on a ladder, so you have to slide all the way down." "But why?" the youngster asks. "Because that's the way the game is played," you answer.

Young children are quick learners when it comes to rules. At a young age they know that, when playing a game as well as in life, there are rules that govern behavior. Certain words are good words and other words are bad. Some behaviors are approved by their parents, and other behaviors lead to trouble. It is hard to learn to do what is right, and rules help to guide them.

I know a young man, who when he was a child, learned these lessons well. He learned that when you got into a car it was important to fasten your seat belt. He did not understand all the safety concerns that adults have, but he understood that it was important. So when he got in the car he would say to his parents, "Fasten your seat belts! It's a rule!"

Rules are like the white lines on the highway – they help us stay in our lane. Newer cars now have an electronic beep to remind us when we have strayed too close to the edge of the lane; they help us follow the rules of the road. Rules are the first step in moving toward adult behavior.

Every human organization has rules – it is the way we shape behavior. Your family has rules, your baseball team has rules, your doctor's office, your school, and your church all have rules for behavior. When you go to work it is important to learn your employers' rules. Your government, local, state and national – all have lots and lots of rules. All these rules are based on core values.

And so the Israelite people, in order to form a viable community, had to develop a set of rules. Think about it! They had been living in Egypt for many generations, living under the laws of Egypt. For a long time they had been enslaved, working to build the great monuments of ancient Egypt and the supply cities where grain was stored. They had to be obedient to slave masters who made life miserable for them. And then by God's intervention and Moses' leadership they were able to escape Egypt, crossing the sea and moving slowly toward the Sinai desert.

It was only three months since they had escaped from Egypt. Moses was trying to figure out how to govern these people who were now free from the rules that they had lived under for so long. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, the Priest of Midian, came to meet Moses. He saw that Moses was wearing himself out trying to resolve disputes among the people, and so he gave Moses good advice. Here is what Jethro said:

[Exodus 18:19-23]

Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."

So Moses listened to his father-in-law, Jethro, and he took his advice and appointed leaders of the people. Moses had learned that the rules of behavior come from God. Moses had a profound understanding that the Law of human behavior is holy. And so he climbed up that volcanic mountain -- the holy mountain called Sinai, and there he sought to know what the core rules of life were that would govern his people.

It was there, on Mount Sinai, in a holy encounter with God, that Moses received the Ten Commandments, ten rules that still shape our common life today.

Over the years the Israelites developed many other rules and the Law of God was very important for them as a way of unifying their nation and regulating their behavior.

It was 1300 years later when Jesus became a teacher of a small band of followers, and began to attract the attention of the leaders of the nation, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the priests. He began to challenge their slave-like observance of minor rules. If your farm animal fell into a pit on the Sabbath, you were not allowed to rescue it, because then you would be working on the Sabbath. If you plucked some heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, you were doing what was not lawful. Jesus kept pushing the Pharisees, showing that responding to human need -- even healing on the Sabbath -- was better than blind obedience. But the religious leaders wanted to say, "It's a rule!"

Jesus taught that the greatest commandments -- the core values -- were God's instructions to love God and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. We have adapted those two rules as guidelines for this congregation, which has a "simple mission to love God and to love people."

Jesus began to teach his followers that the law was good, and should not be abolished, but that his followers needed to go beyond the law to the attitudes of their hearts. That is what would fulfill the law. So the law says, "Do not murder. But if you are angry with your brother and insult him and call him a fool, you are breaking the intent of the law. Go and be reconciled to your brother or sister before coming to offer your gifts to God."

Jesus taught that the law says you shall not commit adultery. But he asked his followers to examine the motivations of their hearts in the way that they looked at and treated other people. The law says not to swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to God. "But I say to you," Jesus said, "do not swear at all by heaven or earth" or on your mother's grave (I added that last phrase). Instead, Jesus said, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." In other words, speak the simple truth from the integrity of your heart.

It is difficult to look not only at the rules but at the intentions of our hearts. That requires spiritual maturity and lots of practice. And it is hard to change your attitude when rules change. Here is where I struggle, just like the Pharisees had a hard time with Jesus' new teachings.

It's a rule! When you are driving on the highway, you may pass on the left only. That is the rule that I was taught when I got my drivers' license -- in Pennsylvania, sixty-four years ago. 'Pass on the left only,' when the only superhighway was the PA Turnpike, two lanes in each direction. 'Pass on the left only' -- it's a rule!

So now when I am driving on a six or eight or ten-lane highway, and someone passes me on the right, I get mad. I want to block them from doing such a stupid and dangerous thing. I say to myself, "Why don't you move over to the left lane to pass, you fool!" And my attitude of resentment can easily lead to stupid behavior on my part. So I have to say to myself, "That rule, 'Pass on the left only' does not apply anymore. You are in a different state, on a different kind of highway. The laws are different. The purpose is to move everyone along rapidly and

safely. Stay cool, and don't cause an accident!" But it is hard to change old attitudes about the rules.

So no wonder we struggle when society changes and culture changes. And yet we must! In our day we European Americans are still trying to figure out how to deal with our old attitudes and old rules toward African Americans, and the legacy of racism that is embedded in our institutions. For far too long we had lived by written and unwritten rules that black people will be treated differently than white people. Like children, we cry out, "It's a rule!"

We who are white need to recognize the terror that our black neighbors experience whenever they encounter the police. One Sunday morning I was driving with a black colleague – a pastor just like me. We were on our way to talk about the anti-racism training that we both were helping to lead. We had to go about fifty miles through rural countryside. I was amazed that my friend and colleague was aware of police cars along the route far before I was. That is because for me, if I were stopped by the police, I could fully expect to be treated with respect.

But for my friend, the way he behaved when the police talked with him or the mood of the police officer on that particular day could have been, for him, a matter of life and death. He might have to deal with suspicion, demands for proof of why he was driving on these roads, delays in his trip while he was taken back to the police station, and threats of arrest. He might have been humiliated by being forced to stand outside the car while being frisked, perhaps made to sit down on the ground in his Sunday clothes, perhaps handcuffed. If he resisted in any way, the officer might assume the worst, and call other police cars to the scene. In any confrontation, my friend faced the threat of suspicion, humiliation, violence, even of death.

This is the experience of African-Americans every day in this country. We who are white need to be deeply aware of the pain, stress, humiliation, anger and terror that this situation causes. Often our police representatives carry around in their heads a set of old rules and old attitudes that leads to this inhuman situation. For the sake of our country, our community, even our own humanity we need to demand that all our neighbors are treated with respect.

Leon Wolf, (a white conservative commentator), has stated that "societies are held together less by laws and force and threats of force than we are by ethereal and fragile concepts like mutual respect and belief in the justness of the system itself." And, I believe, by core values such as Jesus' first and second rules: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

The poet Denise Levertov has written these lines, and I want to conclude with them on this one-year anniversary of the tragic events in Charlottesville, VA.

"Not yet, not yet -
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.”