

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 4, 2026

The Living Gospel of Neighborly Love

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Ten Commandments have returned our national political conversation...it must be an election year. In recent years, several states, including Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, have enacted laws requiring their display in public-school classrooms. Those laws have produced continuing litigation and sharply divided opinions about religious freedom, public education, and the relationship between church and state.

Some Christians celebrate these efforts. If the commandments are displayed prominently, the reasoning goes, perhaps people will behave better. Perhaps children will learn right from wrong. Perhaps society will regain a moral foundation.

But today's reading from Exodus invites us to ask a deeper theological question: What are the commandments actually for? Are they a divine checklist to post on a wall and impose on strangers? Are they a blunt instrument for compelling public morality? Are they the entirety of God's expectations for human life?

If so, we have to wonder why the Torah contains so much more than these ten words. Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments throughout the Torah; the Ten Commandments are part of that much larger body of instruction. They were never meant to be an exhaustive summary of every moral question humanity might encounter.

Nor were they originally given as a public monument. They were given to a people on the move. They were given to people who had just escaped slavery. Israel had lived under Pharaoh's system, a system that measured human worth by production. Pharaoh demanded more bricks with fewer resources. He treated people as property and regarded exhaustion, suffering, and even death as acceptable costs in preserving his wealth and power.

That is the world Israel knew. Then God liberated them. And please notice that liberation comes before commandment. God does not begin, “Obey these rules, and then I might rescue you.” God begins, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

Grace comes first. Rescue comes first. Relationship comes first. The commandments are given afterward to teach a liberated people how to live as liberated people. Israel has been brought out of Egypt, but Egypt must still be brought out of Israel. The habits of empire, the impulse to dominate, exploit, possess, and fear, do not disappear merely because Pharaoh is behind them. Formerly enslaved people can recreate systems of slavery. Wounded people can wound others. A liberated community can rebuild the very structures from which God rescued it.

And so God gives boundaries. Do not place another god above the One who liberated you. Do not turn God into an image you can possess, control, and use. Do not use God’s name to legitimize your ambitions. Do not work yourself, your children, your laborers, immigrants, or even your animals to death. Do not abandon your elders. Do not murder, betray, steal, lie, or allow desire for your neighbor’s life to consume you.

These are not merely individual rules. They are the architecture of a community. God is teaching Israel: “You will **not** live as Pharaoh taught you to live. You will **not** build another Egypt. You will **not** measure one another by usefulness. You will **not** treat your neighbor’s life, labor, marriage, possessions, or reputation as resources for you to consume.” The commandments are not static decorations. They are boundaries around a shared life, protecting people from the voracious appetite of empire and protecting neighbors from one another’s greed.

That brings us to Jesus’ parable. A landowner plants a vineyard. He puts a fence around it, digs a winepress, and builds a watchtower. Everything necessary for fruitfulness is provided. Then the vineyard is entrusted to tenants.

That word matters, “entrusted.” The tenants are not the owners. They are stewards. They have been given a place in which to live and work, but the vineyard is not theirs to possess absolutely. Their calling is relational. They have responsibilities to

the landowner, to the vineyard, to one another, and to the fruit they have been entrusted to cultivate.

But somewhere along the way, stewardship becomes possession. When the owner sends servants to receive the fruit, the tenants respond with violence. They beat one, kill another, and stone another. More servants are sent, and the same thing happens. Finally, the landowner sends his son. The tenants see the son and say, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” Listen to the terrible logic of greed: “If we remove every person who reminds us that this vineyard is not entirely ours, then it will become ours.”

Their world has turned inward. They no longer see gift, relationship, or responsibility. They see only ownership, extraction, scarcity, and threat. The servants are threats. The son is a threat. Even the vineyard’s true owner has become a threat.

They protect “their” territory with violence because they have forgotten who they are. They are stewards pretending to be owners. And before we rush to identify the wicked tenants with some other religious group, nation, political party, or generation, we should remember where Jesus tells this parable: in the temple, in the midst of conflict with religious authorities. This warning is addressed to people who believe they are faithfully managing what belongs to God.

It is not permission for Christians to condemn the Jewish people. It is a warning for every religious community (including the church) whenever we confuse stewardship with ownership, privilege with righteousness, or control with faithfulness.

The vineyard is God’s. The church is God’s. The earth is God’s. Our lives are God’s. Our wealth, buildings, traditions, influence, and institutions are entrusted to us so that they might bear fruit for our neighbors. Yet we are constantly tempted to turn gifts into possessions and boundaries into walls. Healthy boundaries protect relationships. Walls of exclusion protect power.

The commandments were given so that liberated people would not create another Egypt. The vineyard was entrusted so that it would bear fruit. But human systems continually draw us back toward Pharaoh’s logic of acquiring more, protecting

what is yours, distrusting the outsider, silencing anyone who questions you, and treating people as obstacles or resources.

Like Israel in the wilderness, we need boundaries that help us resist those systems. Like the tenants, we need to remember that we are stewards. We need communities that can keep calling us outward; toward God and toward our neighbor.

So upon what will we ground such communities? Will we ground them only in rules? Will we reduce Christian faith to moral policing? Will we imagine that if we post the correct words on enough walls, righteousness will follow? The commandments matter. Jesus does not discard them. But commandments engraved in stone (or printed on posters) cannot, by themselves, create loving hearts.

A command can tell us not to steal. Love asks whether our neighbor has enough. A command can tell us not to murder. Love asks whether our neighbor is safe. A command can tell us not to bear false witness. Love asks whether we are protecting our neighbor's reputation and telling the truth about their humanity. A command can tell us to rest on the Sabbath. Love asks who in our community is being worked to exhaustion and denied the dignity of rest.

In his explanations of the commandments, Martin Luther repeatedly moves beyond "do not" toward active care for the neighbor. Avoiding harm is not enough to avoid harming our neighbor. We are called to help and support our neighbor in every physical need, to protect their possessions and livelihood, to defend them, speak well of them, and interpret their actions in the kindest way. The law draws a boundary around the neighbor. The Gospel sends us across the distance to love them.

Jesus invites us to ground our common life in the living, breathing good news of God; that God comes among us, meets us in our need, forgives us, liberates us, and calls us into relationship. The Gospel is not merely a statement we agree with. It becomes something embodied; something that takes flesh in mercy, generosity, justice, forgiveness, and care.

So let us practice imagining what that might mean. First, picture someone you know well. It might be a family member, a close friend, a coworker, or someone from this congregation. Hold that person in your mind for a moment. Remember

that they are not a problem to solve or a role they perform. They are a person God loves.

Now ask: What would be tangible good news for them right now? Would good news be a hot meal because they are exhausted? Would it be help with rent or groceries because their finances are stretched thin? Would it be someone helping them study for an exam, driving them to an appointment, or sitting with them through a frightening diagnosis? Would good news be a listening ear, someone who does not interrupt, correct, minimize, or rush to offer advice? Would it be companionship in grief? Would it be forgiveness? Would it be hearing, perhaps for the first time in months, “You do not have to carry this alone”? That is Gospel taking flesh.

Now picture someone you do not know well. Perhaps it is the cashier at the grocery store, a neighbor whose name you have forgotten, the person delivering your package, a student in a classroom, or someone sitting on the other side of this sanctuary. We cannot assume we know what good news is for them. Too often, the church has offered people what we decided they needed without first listening to them.

So the first act of neighborly love may be a question. “How are you, really?” “What has been difficult lately?” “What do you wish people understood?” “What would help?” “What would good news look like for you?”

Then comes the harder part: listening without turning their answer back toward ourselves. The tenants in the parable stopped listening because every messenger threatened the world they had constructed. Genuine love listens because it knows the vineyard belongs to God. We do not need to defend our ownership. We are free to receive the neighbor as a gift and to ask what fruit God might bring forth through our relationship.

This is the movement from static faith to living faith. Static faith asks, “Are the rules displayed?” Living faith asks, “Is the neighbor loved?” Static faith asks, “Who has violated the boundary?” Living faith asks, “Whom was this boundary meant to protect?” Static faith engraves commandments on stone. Living faith allows God to write them upon our hearts, our habits, our budgets, our calendars, our relationships, and our common life.

“Let love be genuine,” Scripture tells us. Genuine love does not stop with policing behavior or mounting religious words on walls. Genuine love looks outward. It sees the neighbor’s need, asks faithful questions, listens to the answers, and works alongside the neighbor so that life might flourish.

This does not abolish the law. It fulfills its purpose. For genuine, neighbor-centered love is one of our strongest boundaries against greed. It resists the lie that everything must belong to us. It resists the lie that another person’s need is none of our concern. It resists the lie that violence, exclusion, and domination are necessary to protect what is “ours.”

The vineyard is not ours. It is God’s. And by grace, God has entrusted us with a place in it; not so that we can seize the inheritance, but so that we can bear fruit. Fruit that looks like justice. Fruit that looks like mercy. Fruit that looks like rest for the exhausted, food for the hungry, companionship for the lonely, protection for the vulnerable, and hope for those who cannot yet imagine tomorrow.

This is how we love. This is how we embody the Gospel. And this is how we worship God most authentically: not merely by placing God’s words upon our walls, but by allowing God’s liberating love to become visible in the way we care for our neighbors. Amen.