

Leviticus 19:9-11,18 23rd Sunday after Pentecost Nov.11,1990

*9When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.*

*11You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. 12And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. 13You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. 14You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 15You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. 17You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

A father's foolishness: that is how I labeled it. On that cold November day my sisters, brother and I were out in a corn field, gathering ears of corn from the ground, filling baskets. The field was fifteen or twenty acres large. The corn that had been missed by the corn picker was everywhere. Were we to pick it all up it would take us forever. And on that Saturday I knew that a couch and a blanket and cartoons were waiting for me. My hands were cold, the wind stung my face, and I was disgusted with the whole thing. If only I had known then what I know now! I would have marched right up to my father and declared, "God forbids us from doing this. In Leviticus 19 it says, 'You shall not gather the gleanings after your harvest.'" For that is precisely what we were doing, gleaning.

I found that passage thirty years too late. This week as I read the part that we skipped over in our first lesson, I read those words and and some others that interest me. I'd like to share them with you.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard

bare, neither shall you gather fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner: I am the Lord.”

Not very efficient, we would say. At a time when increases in productivity are sources of pride for corporations and nations, a command to leave behind some of the crop is way out of step. Squeeze every ounce of energy out of that worker, more intensity, longer hours, more profit for the stockholders. Grab every market you can, never leave some for the other guy. Let the fit survive, reaping all the fruits of the harvest, let the weak be cast aside. But the Lord commanded his people to let some of the crop stand, unharvested, not to pick up what had been missed, that there might be something left for the poor.

Our world is not the same as when God first gave this command. Had there been poor people to pick up what had been missed in our corn field, my father would have gladly left it for them. But corn left in the field today will simply rot. Beyond that not one person among us will be harvesting a single field this fall.

For us to be faithful to this command of God today requires us to follow not the letter but the spirit of this law. Letting go of what could be ours, of what is ours, this is the spirit of this command. When we give for others, to others, we leave part of the crop unharvested. A great many of you will offer some of your harvest for hungry people you have never seen. You will take the dollars that come from your labor and freely give them for people who have not been blessed as we have: The poor of our day.

Amazing. You and I who complain that there is never enough, at least never as much as we would like will freely let go of money for some strangers: People of other lands, of other languages, of other races. In this way we seek to live out the command of God: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Of course this is only one way. Out of love for God some among us let go not only of their money, but of that which is more precious, their time. One donates countless hours to the PTA - another teaches children soccer skills and sportsmanship - another delivers meals on wheels and takes time for conversation - another goes that extra mile in her work, making the day brighter and easier for those around her. Instead of grabbing and grasping for self alone, you are letting go of what could be yours to give to those in need.

When Jesus was asked about the great commandment in the law he responded with these words: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. This is

the first and great commandment. The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

If you want to know what God wants for his people in this world, that is it. To love God with all our being, and to love one another. The whole Old Testament comes down to that.

But there is also a New Testament, the story of God loving us with all God’s heart and soul and mind and strength, loving us even more than God’s own life in Jesus Christ. It is the story of God accepting no limits. Though our love for God and our neighbor be limited, God will not let that love limit our future. It is the story of how when every human possibility has been exhausted, and life itself has been ended, God creates new life in raising Jesus from the dead.

You are people of this New Testament. You are a people who can show your love for God and your love for your neighbors in any way which God directs you. In the coming weeks we will ask you to think of how you may want to increase the ways you show your love for God and for your neighbor. Giving of our time in the community, in the church, beyond this community, these will be the challenges you will be asked to consider: Letting go of more of the money that you could use for yourself, setting it aside for the poor, for use by the church - committing yourself to further prayer and devotions and Bible Study as with your time you express your love for God.

My mind goes back to where we began, a cold November day in a corn field. The corn we picked up did not amount to much. But I was changed by that day and many like it. God’s gifts should not be wasted. That day and many days like it I learned that lesson. Words would never have taught me as well as the doing.

We all can say, “I love God. I love my neighbor.” But going out to some new cold cornfields in our lives will give those words a meaning for us that they have never had before. Sacrifice to leave more of the money of your life for the hungry, and you will be changed. Spend twenty minutes reading God’s word and praying each day and your love for God will grow. Take an hour or two or three each week and let it be used by those who help the poor or the sick, or children. It won’t be easy at first, but how much more precious than hours wrapped in a blanket, watching TV.