

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

When parents sit down to eat with their young children, they do not say, “Make sure you eat your dessert.” But they might say, “Eat your broccoli,” or “Eat at least half of the peas on your plate.” Parents do not need to order their children to do what they enjoy doing. They command them to do what they do not want to do. It’s the same way with God. “Eat your peas” is not one of the Ten Commandments. But it could be in the sense that it’s something many people detest doing. God’s commandments do not forbid those things which we wouldn’t do anyway. They forbid the things that our sinful flesh wants to do, and command the things our flesh does not want to do.

In Leviticus 19, our text for today, God commands His people in how they should live. “*Do not gather the gleanings after your harvest,*” He says, “*Neither shall you gather the fallen grapes from your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and sojourner.*” It goes against our nature to leave behind, and walk away from something of value. You wouldn’t leave your change at the cashier’s counter when making a purchase, would you? Neither would a farmer or vineyard owner leave behind some of his crop. And so God commands His people to do what they would not do naturally. He commands them to have compassion upon those who are less fortunate; to leave some of their crop for those who have little or nothing.

Throughout our text God speaks to His people in this manner. Our sinful flesh wants what is not ours, and so God commands His people not to steal. Our flesh wants to lie to avoid trouble, so God forbids lying with the tongue. Our flesh desires to bear grudges, to hate those who do us harm, and to seek revenge upon them. God, however, forbids all these. He does not say, “Love your friends.” Jesus commands us to “*love (our) enemies.*” He does not say that we should love ourselves. He says, “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” God does not need to command us to eat our dessert. He commands us to eat our peas--to do those things that our sinful flesh hates doing.

And so in the Ten Commandments God orders children to obey their parents because children naturally disobey. He commands Christians to worship because our flesh wants to forsake the assembly of God’s people around Word and Sacrament. He commands us to use our tongues to speak well of our neighbor because it is natural for us to slander and gossip. In Ephesians 5 God, through the Apostle Paul, instructs husbands to love their wives because, by nature, men do not love, they provide. And He instructs wives to submit to their husbands because this is not natural for them to do.

Now did you notice, when our text was read, all the instances where God says, “*I am the Lord*”? Five times He repeats these words. After every command, or set of commands, He follows up with “*I am the Lord.*” I suppose we could take this to mean that He wants to impress upon His people that these commands are His, and so they had better obey. And certainly they are. Anyone, and this includes us, who disregards God’s Ten Commandments will have to answer to Him. How dare we set aside an iota or a dot from God’s Law! How dare we relax even one of God’s commands! God did not give His Law for us to consider and edit according to our opinions. He gave His Law for us to obey. And so we can say that God is writing His signature to His commands when He adds the words, “*I am the Lord.*”

But there is more to these words. Last week in New York City, Mayor de Blasio angered many citizens when he blatantly disregarded a number of traffic laws with his own vehicle. He gave the impression that he, as mayor, is above the law. God acts in no such manner. He keeps His own Law, for His Law comes out of who He is. And so the words, “*I am the Lord,*” do not just tell us that these are His laws; these laws tell us who God is. He, *the Lord*, keeps His own laws because He is true to Himself. There are no peas or broccoli with God. For Him, it’s all dessert. God has no problem with

leaving some of His crop in His field for the poor and sojourner. This, in fact, is why you and I are His people today. His abundant grace was more than enough for the Jews. We who are Gentiles also receive grace upon grace. We glean the leftovers of His crop. We retrieve the fallen grapes from His vineyard.

God's commands regarding love, although difficult for us--even impossible--are, for God, a piece of cake. It's not peas; it's dessert. It does not go against God's nature to love His enemies, to love those who hate Him, to love those who bear Him harm and breathe murder against Him in their hearts. Although unnatural for us, loving His enemies describes who God truly is. We love those who love us, as Jesus points out. But God loves those who do not love Him. And so God is perfectly able to love His neighbor as Himself. In fact, He went far beyond this. Jesus loved you with such a great love that He emptied Himself. He gave up His entire self to the cross for you. He counted you of more value even than Himself. And not because you and I are such lovers of God. The amazing thing is that God loved those who are His enemies even more than Himself!

Now here is the strange thing about this...we struggle with it. It offends us to hear that God loved us when we were His enemies. We want God to love us because we do something for Him. Just as we want to earn our paycheck, so we want to earn God's love. And not just His love, we want to earn eternal life--a place in heaven. This is the reason why many people avoid church. They don't want charity from God. They want to do it themselves. They don't want to sit in a pew and hear about God's love. They want to go out and be providers. It's why the world sees Christians as a bunch of weak, soft, charity-seekers who cannot do things for themselves, but depend on God for everything.

These peas are hard to swallow, but it's true. This is who we are. Apart from Christ we are nothing. "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*" says the Apostle Paul. We need charity. We need mercy. We need God's love, and we need to hear it and receive it often. We are the poor and sojourner who have nothing, but God out of grace, gives us the gleanings from His field. He fills His cup on the altar for you with the grapes leftover in His vineyard.

We are fast approaching Lent. Think with me about the one thief on the cross who went to hell. He was not about to soften his heart to Jesus. He was too proud and stubborn to repent. He refused the crop of mercy leftover in God's field. He had no use for words like forgiveness, mercy, and love. But the other thief, just as much God's enemy as the first, was given a different attitude. He was okay with being loved by Jesus. He was okay with being shown mercy. He was okay with being given a place in heaven that he, himself, did not earn.

My friends, that same love, and mercy, and charity is here for you today. Be not unrepentant. Repent of the stubborn pride in your heart. God does love you, and not because of what you do. He loves you because it is His nature to love sinners, to love the helpless, to love His enemies. But you are His enemy no more. He has befriended you through the blood of Christ poured out for you. He has forgiven all your sins. He has held back nothing from you. All that He has is yours, including a place with Him in heaven forever. No, you will never earn this. It's a gift in Jesus Christ. It's yours in your baptism. It's given to you through Word and Sacrament. It's definitely not peas and broccoli. It's pure dessert. There is no Law you must do to have this treasure. It's on your plate for you now simply because you have a gracious God, a God who loves the ungodly, who loves the unlovable, who loves you. Amen.