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May 20th: Deuteronomy 21 & Luke 11:1-28

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Unsolved murders, war brides, unloved wives, rebellious children, and displayed corpses. Jesus teaches on prayer.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 21. If in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess, someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities. And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer that has never been worked and that has not pulled in a yoke, and the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which is neither ploughed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley.

There the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister to him and to bless in the name of the Lord. And by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled. And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley,

and they shall testify, Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed.

Accept atonement, O Lord, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for. So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God gives them into your hand, and you take them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pair her nails, and she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured, and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month.

After that you may go into her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife, but if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants, but you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave, since you have humiliated her. If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and though they discipline him will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice, he is a glutton and a drunkard. Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones, so you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear and fear. And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.

You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. Deuteronomy chapter 21 continues the section devoted to the sixth commandment, You shall not murder, and this section contains laws related to discovered corpses in verses 1-9, women taken in war in verses 10-14, children concerning the rights of the first born and then the law concerning the rebellious son in verses 15-21 and then the law concerning the hanged corpse in verses 22-23. This is perhaps one of the most troubling chapters in the book of Deuteronomy, with laws that greatly unsettle some modern sensibilities.

Considering the law for unsolved murder with which this chapter begins, we should probably relate it to the law concerning cities of refuge in chapter 19. Both involve a concern for distance between cities, about murder and the shedding of innocent blood. Both of the laws relate to the community's responsibility both to avoid and give account of the shedding of innocent blood.

This law provides a ritual to deal with cases of unsolved murder, and like the law of the cities of refuge, it expresses the community's responsibility both to avoid and give account of the shedding of innocent blood. Once again here we are seeing the way that concerns of holiness and atonement interplay with concerns of justice. Innocent blood polluted the land and needed to be atoned for, and the justice system was always supposed to serve the end of guarding the people's holiness, not just the deterrence of crime and retribution to criminals.

What does the ritual mean? First of all, the ritual is not a sacrifice. There is no mention of sprinkling of the blood, it does not occur in the context of the tabernacle. While the priests are present, they do not seem to be doing most of the actions.

What can we make of this as an unsacrificial ritual then? Some have seen it as a symbolic execution of the murderer, others have seen it as a self-maledictory oath that if we are guilty of this then we should suffer the same fate. I believe it is most likely to be a symbolic re-enactment of the murder. By using a heifer that had not been put under a yoke or worked by man, the animal, and also the murder victim, were presented as not being subject to human responsibility.

Not only was this the case of the animal, but it was also the case of the location in which it was killed. By performing the ritual in an unworked valley that has not been ploughed or sown, there is also the statement being made that the murder did not occur within the city's direct jurisdiction. Nevertheless, in performing this ritual, they are making formal testimony concerning the murder, giving account of it to the Lord.

This occurs in the presence of the priests as the representatives of the Lord, but the action seems to be largely that of the elders of the town. By so making account of the blood of the victim, they make a non-sacrificial form of atonement for the victim. The next law, concerning the taking of female war captives as brides, is more immediately troubling to us.

Why would God give permission to Israelite men to take prisoners of war as wives in such a manner? Before considering the law it is important to consider the purpose of law in general. Laws like this are not an idealistic council of perfection, they are an attempt to regulate messy and imperfect realities. War would render a great many women, widows and orphans, and in a society where survival largely depended upon the family structure, such women would be incredibly vulnerable, not just economically but also vulnerable to predatory males and to rape.

Then there is the fact that the rape of women was regarded as a natural part of ancient warfare. It is also a feature of modern warfare. After World War II, the Red Army is supposed to have raped over 2 million German women, many of them gang raped, by some descriptions from the age of 8 to the age of 80, and a great many of those women went on to commit suicide.

In ancient and in modern warfare, if you defeat your enemies, it is presumed that you get to ravish their women. Judges 5, verses 28-30 gives us a picture of this in the Song of Deborah and Barak. A womb or two for every man was the reality within ancient society, and this is the reality to which this law is speaking.

A good law in such a society is an enforceable law that will effectively both condemn and mitigate such cruelties. A law requiring ideal practice might not be a good law. It might effectively condemn the wrong, but it wouldn't be effective in mitigating it, and it might not be enforceable, both of which are criteria for good laws.

This law then speaks directly to the sexual desire of the victorious Israelite warrior. He has been without sexual relations for some time. He sees an attractive female captive.

What is he to do? Can he just have his way with her, as most others would in the ancient world? No. He must take her under his care. She must have the status of a wife.

She must not be raped or treated as a concubine enslaved for sex. She must be given time to mourn and adjust to her new situation. He must not take her as soon as he wants, making her a plaything of the imperatives of his lust.

She must be allowed to wait for a month. She must be allowed to go free if he does not want to take her as his wife. She must not be reduced to slavery.

All of these then are ways in which the ugly realities of war, ugly realities that can't just be wished away, are mitigated significantly. Marrying a war bride would be a means by which she could be provided for within the family structure. It would give security to people who might otherwise be destitute and preyed upon.

When we read such laws, however, we should be very careful to recognise that they are laws of their time in many cases. These are wise laws, addressing timeless principles of morality in a timely way into specific situations. When we interpret these laws we should be very careful to be able to distinguish these different things, to recognise the inner principles of justice, what is the law trying to do, and then to understand the contingencies of the situation it is speaking into.

It would not be just if we applied this law today in the same way. However, that does not mean that we should condemn it as a law in its own time, it was appropriate within its time, nor does it mean that there is nothing for us to learn here. If we understand the inner principle and how the central realities of the law are being addressed to specific

situations, we can learn a lot about doing the same thing in our own day.

This is followed by a law concerning the inheritance of the firstborn. One of the features of the Pentateuch is the presence of law alongside history, and there are many places in which the law and the history comment upon each other. This is one such occasion.

There is a wife who is loved, and a wife who is unloved. And we've seen that story before, it's the story of Jacob with Rachel and Leah. So Jacob went into Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Genesis 29, 30-31. The firstborn son was Leah's.

The firstborn son was Reuben. And what should get our attention here is that the language of this text is the language that's used in Genesis. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity, and preeminent in power.

Genesis 49, 3. Jacob's love of Rachel over Leah, and his favoritism in his practice, led to so many forms of tragedy within his family. It led to the rivalry between his wives. It led to rivalry between their sons.

It led to the great tensions and disaster that followed the seduction of Dinah. It led to the attack upon Joseph, and sending him down into slavery in Egypt. All of this conflict in the life of Jacob's family was caused by his failure to practice justice within his own household.

The fact he allowed the favoritism of love to go over the requirements of justice and fairness and equity. Indeed, when the brothers present the bloodied robe of Joseph to their father, they use language that reminds us of this text. Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, This we have found, please identify whether it is your son's robe or not. And he identified it and said, It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him.

Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces. That same robe was an expression of Jacob's favoritism. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a robe of many colors.

But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. Genesis chapter 37 verses 3 to 4. This is not the only commandment in the Pentateuch that retrospectively comments on the Rachel and Leah situation. Leviticus chapter 18 verse 18.

And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, and covering her nakedness while her sister is still alive. What is the commandment doing here? It does connect with the surrounding commandments. It connects with the preceding commandment by protecting unloved and vulnerable women from the unchecked will of men and the injustice that they might wreak upon them.

It also connects with the following commandment by requiring justice between the generations. It connects with the sixth commandment, in which section this occurs, because the favoritism of Jacob was a sin that led to disastrous consequences and attempts at murder in his family. It provoked the attempt upon Joseph's life.

It likely provoked the rebellion of Reuben. While the sons were clearly at fault in these instances, the father also bears his responsibility for what happened too. If society is to avoid strife that might lead to murder, justice must prevail in families and not favoritism.

The law concerning the rebellious son connects with the one that has preceded it. This is a son that is entirely unworthy and rebellious. It is important to consider that this is not a young child, it is presumably a grown man, and this is in a context where the family was the basic structure of civil society.

To rebel against that, to rebel against your father and mother, is a very serious thing. Exodus chapter 21 verse 15, whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death, and in verse 17 of that chapter, whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. Such a son is supposed to provide for and to honor his parents, but is instead rebelling against, ruining them and wasting their property with his gluttony and even terrorizing them with his violence.

In the face of such a breach of the honor that is due between the generations, serious judgment was called for. This is one area where the law of Deuteronomy and Exodus is stricter than that of many of the other societies around it. Nevertheless, there are also ways in which this is a curbing form of practice.

In the story of Genesis chapter 38 with Judah and Tamar, we see the absolute authority of the patriarch in a society where there is not a surrounding network of families. And in that sort of society, Judah can summarily declare the death penalty upon his daughter-in-law Tamar. The responsibility of the elders to be involved in this places limits upon that.

Once again, the point of such a law is not a timeless ideal, but to establish a just way of dealing things within the constraints of the existing society. A question to consider. The law concerning the son of the unfavored mother comments upon the previous history of Israel.

Can you think of any other examples of laws within the Pentateuch that comment upon the stories of the Pentateuch? Luke chapter 11 verses 1 to 28. Now Jesus was praying in

a certain place, and when he finished one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. And he said to them, When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us, and lead us not into temptation.

And he said to them, Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him? And he will answer from within, Do not bother me, the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed, I cannot get up and give you anything. I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he has his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you, seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you, for everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent, or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. But some of them said, He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

While others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.

And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe.

But when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted, and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none, it says, I will return to my house from which I came.

And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.

As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, Blessed

is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you were nursed. But he said, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it. Jesus' teaching on prayer with which Luke chapter 11 begins is relatively brief but exceedingly important.

Of the Synoptic Gospels it is Luke in particular that places an emphasis upon Jesus as a man of prayer. Notice for instance that Jesus prays before the heavens are opened in his baptism. He prays before he is transfigured.

He prays as he chooses the twelve disciples. These things aren't recorded in the other Gospels. Seeing the importance and the power that prayer had for Jesus, it is understandable that the disciples would want to learn how to pray from him.

And the Lord's Prayer is not just a worked example of a good prayer, although it is that. It's a gift of specific words that we ourselves can pray. The address is to Father, one of the things that comes into very clear focus in this chapter and elsewhere is the fact that God is our Father and we approach him as such.

Recognition that God is our Father is found in the Old Testament too but it comes into much clearer focus than the New, particularly through Christ's own relationship with his Father. And it comes into the foreground at times of redemption too. We should beware of over-intimatising this language.

It's not the language of Daddy. However we should also beware on the other hand of removing the intimacy from it. The fact that we address God as our Father is truly remarkable.

Also Father language speaks of a relationship between the speaker and the person being addressed. Father language is calling upon God, among other things, to recognise us as his children and to act on our behalf. Isaiah chapter 63 verse 16 expresses this, In Exodus chapter 4, Israel is said to be God's firstborn son and God's recognition of his son and how he stands as father relative to that son is one of the reasons for his redemption of Israel and his people.

When we address God as Father, among other things, we are calling upon God to act on account of the way that he stands relative to us as our Father and we as his children. Hallowed be your name is also a statement of fact and a calling to act. It expresses the desire of the person who's praying that God's name be hallowed, that it be made holy.

God's concern for the holiness of his name is seen in such places as Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 19 to 23. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, these are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land. But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake, O

house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

The concern that God's name be hallowed is the concern of the third commandment. We do not want to bear the name of the Lord in vain. We do not want God's name to be profaned.

Indeed, there are ways in which the expanded version of the Lord's Prayer in particular could be seen as a transformation of the Ten Commandments into prayer. In declaring Our Father, we are appealing to the one God, beyond which there is no other. In saying, Hallowed be your name, we are calling for the fulfilment of the third commandment.

In the petition, Your Kingdom come, we are calling for the great Sabbath rest of the day of the Lord. The petition, Hallowed be your name then, is not merely a statement of fact. It's a desire that God would act to display the holiness of his name through action in the world.

God is ultimately the one who will hallow his own name. And the next petition calls for God's eschatological kingdom, for his reign to come, for God's rule to be seen in the situations of history. In these statements, we're being taught the posture of longing for God's action in history, for hungering and thirsting after his righteousness.

All of this is a way of conforming us to God's will, teaching us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness over all other things. And the next petition turns to our need for bread. Maybe we could see this as an allusion to manna, the manna that's provided each day for the people's need.

This is a recognition of our utter dependence upon God for our sustenance and our immediate provision. We receive all the good things of the world as a constant gift from his hand, and there's a recognition of a hand behind all of our own human providence. The next petition is about the forgiveness of sins.

The new covenant involved a general release from Israel's sins, its debt, as the nation was forgiven its sins. Christ declares the year of the Lord's favour. In Isaiah 61 that is foretold, the chapter that he reads out in the context of the Nazareth sermon.

And there is a reciprocal element here, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. Indeed if we do not forgive others, we ourselves will not enjoy forgiveness. We must remit all the debts that people owe to us.

We must live as those who have relinquished their claims upon others, who put ourselves in the hands of God and neighbour. In the requirement that we forgive others,

we are being called to participate in God's own act of forgiveness. God has declared this great release of the year of Jubilee, and now we're supposed to extend that to all the people around us, to give them the forgiveness that God has given to us.

The final petition of the prayer is a prayer for deliverance from the time of testing and the evil one. We can think of Christ's own experience in the wilderness as he led into temptation. The temptation is that time when your faith might be tested to breaking point, that time of difficulty and trial where your metal is tested and you may find yourself wanting.

From the Lord's prayer, Jesus goes into some more general teaching about prayer. He emphasises the importance of forgiveness, and we've already seen this as a theme in his healings. Often people have to persist.

It's their stubborn faith that Christ will hear them and will answer them that gets rewarded with healing. And the illustration that Jesus gives of the man at night requesting food from his neighbour highlights two ways in which we can expect the efficacy of our prayers. First of all, on the basis of relationship, that if you approach your friendly neighbour, you expect him to give things on the basis of your friendship.

And then beyond that, on the basis of honour, that if he doesn't respond to friendship, your impudence and the fact that he must respond on the basis of his own honour to that is good reason to expect that you will get what you have requested. God will give what we need. Prayer is about presenting genuine need to the Lord, and God does not withhold from us what we need.

This is the request of a son or daughter to their father, and on the basis of the love that he bears for us and the need that we have, we can expect a favourable response. Indeed, we'll be given more than we expect. Our Heavenly Father will give the Spirit to those who ask him.

Prayer preceded Jesus' reception of the Spirit at his baptism, and it will also precede the Church's reception of the Spirit at Pentecost. After casting out a spirit of muteness from a man, some of the people speculate that Jesus is doing so by the power of Satan himself, by Beelzebul, and others are trying to test him, asking for a sign. Jesus' response shows that the kingdom of Satan is in trouble.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, and if Satan's is such a kingdom, then its days are numbered. However, if Jesus is casting out demons by the power of God, then something more is happening. The kingdom of God has come upon them.

The reference to the finger of God here looks back to Exodus chapter 8 verse 19, with the conflict between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh and his magicians. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, this is the finger of God. In this statement, Jesus is implicitly

comparing those testing him with Pharaoh's magicians in the Exodus account.

Jesus presents this situation in terms of the Exodus. He is delivering an enslaved people from Pharaoh, Beelzebul, by the finger of God. Jesus casts himself as if a heavenly strongman, fighting against the demonic forces of Satan.

Satan is the strongman, and Christ is the stronger. Just as Jesus spoke of Satan falling like lightning after the return of the 72, here he talks about him being overcome, his armor being removed, and his spoil being divided. The people have been held hostage by Satan, and now people like this mute man are being released, the spoil is being taken from the strongman, people who had been in his clutches are being snatched loose.

But this is no time for presumption or complacency. While Israel is being set free by the ministry of Christ, it cannot presume upon that fact. If they do not deal with the root issues within their hearts, they will merely be occupied once again by these demonic forces, in a way far more severe than their original condition.

Jesus has just spoken about the way that you are either for him or against him. There's no not against, middle ground. And here, cleansing that leads to just leaving the place empty is not enough either.

It just leaves people open to be overtaken by worse sins and demons. They must be filled rather with the This passage ends with a woman crying out from the crowd to Jesus, talking about how blessed his mother is that he is her son. And Jesus responds in a way that does not disagree with her, but corrects her and shows that there is more to the picture.

The true blessedness comes to the people who hear the word of God and keep it. The sense of Jesus' response is more than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it. It is less a denial of the woman's statement, than it is what is more response.

And here we can understand better what the blessing of Mary, the mother of Jesus is. The blessing of Mary is not on account of the mere physical bearing of Jesus. Her blessing is on account of the fact that she believed the word of God.

Luke chapter 1 verse 45, And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. She heard the word of God, and she kept it, and was blessed on that account. Indeed, we are the first and the paradigmatic New Covenant believer.

A question to consider, how might the practice of prayer have changed for the average member of the people of God from the Old Covenant to the New?