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July 1st: Judges 12 & 1 Corinthians 1:1-25

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Jephthah and the Ephraimites. The foolishness of God versus the wisdom of men.

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

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Transcript

Judges 12. The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire. And Jephthah said to them, I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand.

And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.

And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Let me go over, the men of Gilead said to him, Are

you an Ephraimite? When he said, No, they said to him, Then say Shibboleth. And he said, Sibboleth, for he could not pronounce it right.

Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell. Jephthah judged Israel six years.

Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead. After him Ibn Zan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons.

And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibn Zan died and was buried at Bethlehem. After him Elon the Zebulonite judged Israel, and he judged Israel ten years.

Then Elon the Zebulonite died and was buried at Ajaran in the land of Zebulun. After him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirithonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years.

Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirithonite died and was buried at Pirithon in the land of Ephraim in the hill country of the Amalekites. In Judges chapter 12 following Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites the Ephraimites got angry with Jephthah for not calling them to the fight. We've already seen the Ephraimites causing trouble like this back in Judges chapter 8 verses 1-3.

Then the men of Ephraim said to him, What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian? And they accused him fiercely. And he said to them, What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abieza? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, or Ebonzib. What have I been able to do in comparison with you? Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

Gideon had assuaged the Ephraimites anger, appeasing them with a soft answer. But the Ephraimites were far more aggressive in their attitude to Jephthah, threatening to burn him alive. Jephthah had crossed over the Jordan during part of his fight against the Ammonites, not confining the fighting to the Transjordan.

However, he hadn't involved the Ephraimites. A great battle had been won in Israel, but the Ephraimites hadn't received the share of the glory from it that they believed with Zerju as the dominant northern tribe. Ephraim seemingly have an exalted sense of their importance.

But we are also seeing the fact that the Jordan is a fault line in the land, between the Transjordanian tribes and the tribes of the Promised Land proper. Ephraim are none too pleased to see a powerful leader arising in Gilead. This might threaten Ephraim's dominance.

Unlike Gideon, who was in the middle of his battle against the Midianites and could not afford direct conflict with the Ephraimites, Jephthah has defeated the Ammonites so he can afford to deal with the Ephraimites far more directly. Unlike the Ephraimites, however, Jephthah isn't spoiling for a fight. He begins, as he did with the Ammonites, by trying to communicate with them, with an act of diplomacy.

The Gileadites were the ones that had conflict with the Ammonites, and he argues that he called for the assistance of the Ephraimites at that point, when they really could have made a difference and aided their brothers. But they did not provide any help. They had left Gilead to its fate.

When there was a risky and costly battle to be fought, they were nowhere to be found. However, when there was glory to be won, they were concerned to be first on the scene. As they hadn't come to Jephthah's initial summons, he didn't summon them when there was far easier glory to be gained.

Jephthah, without the aid of the Ephraimites when he had needed it, had taken his life into his hands. However, the Lord had assisted Jephthah in the battle, even when the Ephraimites had not. The Ephraimites presumably did not respond favourably to Jephthah's message, because the next thing we see he is gathering all of the men of Gilead for battle.

Jephthah led the Gileadites in battle against the Ephraimites. There are times when people fall out over a seemingly secondary matter, and it blows up into a great argument, in which someone says something, in which a deep underlying tension between them erupts and is brought to the surface. And this seems to have happened here.

The Ephraimites declare that the Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim. It isn't exactly clear what their taunt means, but it might be suggesting that the Gileadites had no true identity of their own, and were little more than illegitimate outcasts of Ephraim and Manasseh. The fault line between the tribes in the Promised Land and the tribes in the Transjordan had been apparent in Joshua chapter 22, in the incident with the altar.

Here we see it again. And we should see the parallels between what Gilead is to the Ephraimites, and what Jephthah is to the sons of Gilead, in chapter 11 verses 1-3. Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.

Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tov. And worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. The sons of Gilead didn't recognise

Jephthah as a true brother and heir, but made him a fugitive and an outcast.

The Ephraimites treat the Gileadites in the same way. Fittingly, the conflict occurs at the fords of the Jordan, which is the ugly scar dividing the face of the nation. The tribes of the Transjordan on one side, and the tribes of the Promised Land on the other.

And there is a sort of immediate poetic justice here. The Gileadites capture the fords of the Jordan. It's a hugely strategic location.

It's mentioned in Judges chapter 3 verse 28 in Ehud's conflict with the Moabites, and in chapter 7 verse 24 in Gideon's battle against the Midianites. While the Ephraimites had accused the Gileadites of being fugitives, now the Ephraimites are the fugitives, inspected by the Gileadites. They are all tested at the fords.

If they could pronounce the word Shibboleth, they could cross. But if they used a characteristic Ephraimite mispronunciation, Sibboleth, they were killed. The Ephraimites, despite seeing themselves as the greatest of the tribes, presumably, and perhaps elevating their dialect over others, as maybe the received pronunciation of Israel, could not pronounce the word Shibboleth correctly.

This also reveals that the tribes are sharply divided by dialect, in a sort of mini-Babel. And for all of their self-importance, the Ephraimites are the ones with the mispronunciation. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed.

About 40,000 of the Transjordanian tribes had crossed over the Jordan to fight for their brothers, in Joshua chapter 4 verse 13. And now the Ephraimites, who had denied the Transjordanians part in the nation, lost 42,000 people at the crossing of the Jordan. Is there a significance to this number? Beyond being a weak reminder of the 40,000 Transjordanians who crossed the Jordan to fight in Joshua, 42,000 is also 12,000 multiplied by 3 and a half, a broken 7. I can't see much significance, but there might be something there.

This was a truly devastating defeat. It would likely have left Ephraim as a spent or crippled military force for decades afterwards. Following this, Jephthah establishes dominance over the Ephraimites and judges Israel for six years.

But in this great civil battle we see how fractured Israel has become. The account of Jephthah is followed by records of three judges, Ibni, Ilan and Abdon. They complete the chiasm or the bookend pattern that began with Gideon.

70 sons, no sons. 30 sons, no sons. 30 sons, no sons.

70 sons and grandsons. This pattern foregrounds the issue of aspirations to dynastic succession, something that is a central aspect of the stories of both Gideon and Jephthah. However, it is also subtly present in the details of the other stories.

The large numbers of sons suggest the multiplying of marriages, and the involvement of the sons in ruling cities or riding on donkeys suggests proto-dynastic elements emerging. Ibn gives 30 daughters outside of his clan, and he brings 30 daughters in. This reveals a man who was shrewdly developing patriarchal marriage alliances between different groups, treating his children as chips that he could bargain for greater power politically.

He was multiplying wives so that he could multiply children so that he could multiply marriage alliances so that he could gain power. Abdon is only a judge for 8 years, but he already has two generations of potential princes lined up. A question to consider, what are some of the reasons why dynasty building might be a problem? What are some of the obstacles that the Lord presented to pursuing it? 1 Corinthians 1 verses 1-25 I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you may be faithful to the Lord, who is faithful to you, and that you may be faithful to the Lord, who is faithful to you, and that you may be faithful to the Lord, who is faithful to you, and that you may be faithful to the Lord, who is faithful to you, and that you may be faithful to the Lord, who is faithful to you, I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people, that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

I did baptize also the household of Stephanus. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach, to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Paul begins his first epistle to the Corinthians, introducing himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will. Paul generally, but not always, introduces himself in his letters as an

apostle, the epistles to the Thessalonians being the main exception to the norm. He writes as one called person to a body of called people, and he writes with a co-author, Sosthenes.

Sosthenes may have been a fellow worker we don't read of elsewhere. Sosthenes wasn't an uncommon name. Some have argued that he might have been Paul's amanuensis, as we learn in chapter 16 verse 21 that Paul hadn't written most of the letter in his own writing, presumably having someone else to write it for him.

However, it seems most likely to me that Sosthenes was the same man as the one mentioned in Acts chapter 18 verse 17, the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. The Corinthians have been set apart by God, called to be holy, part of a wider body of Christians around the world, who call on the name of Jesus, bound together by their common Lord.

Paul's opening benediction, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, is quite characteristic of his work. The life of the church and every Christian is founded upon this grace and peace, so it's entirely appropriate that it would be to this that Paul appeals at the beginning of his epistles. Paul had first visited Corinth in Acts chapter 18.

In verses 1 to 11 of that chapter we read, When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent.

From now on I will go to the Gentiles. And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.

Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household, and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Paul often begins his letters with thanksgiving. Here he gives thanks for the entire span of the salvation that the Corinthians enjoy, from its first incipents in the work of the gospel arriving among them, to the faithful empowering and sustaining of Christ as they wait for his appearing, to the vindication that they will receive on the great and final day of the Lord. God has called them into the fellowship of his Son, and he is faithful to confirm them in that fellowship and preserve them to the end.

In verse 10, Paul gets right to the point of his letter, appealing to the Corinthians to be in agreement, to avoid division, and to be united in mind and judgment. He has heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among them. Chloe was possibly a business person whose servants had brought news to Paul.

The Corinthians had become sectarian, with various parties opening up among them, with different members identifying with different teachers and leaders, some with Paul, some with Peter or Cephas, some with Apollos, and some with Christ. And Paul will later argue for a proper way of considering the relationship between different ministers. However, with a number of prominent and charismatic leaders, it was not surprising that the Corinthians would form parties around their favourite figures in ways that led to division and sectarianism in the congregation.

The Church, as will become clear in chapter 12, is characterised by diversity, but a diversity through which unity is achieved through many gifts being exercised in different ways for the common good. The mind that the Church has should not be sectarian either, because the one mind of Christ is that mind mentioned in chapter 2, verse 16. The different ministers in the Church should be regarded not as competitors, but as collaborators in a grand shared task, each performing different roles in a way that is complementary, not competitive.

Paul argues this in chapter 3. Christ is undivided. He unites all true ministers. Christ isn't the head of a sect of his own alongside a sect of Peter and Paul and Apollos.

He is the one to whom all are subject and the one that all serve. Paul presses this point further. Paul was not crucified for the Corinthians.

Christ's cross, which Paul proclaims, is unique. It's an event that defines all Christians, whoever their more immediate leaders might be. What Paul is doing here is simply applying the teaching of Christ himself from Matthew 23, verses 8-12.

But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Just as Paul wasn't crucified for the Corinthians, they weren't baptised in his name.

Baptism is for Paul an event that has a defining force for the Christian. It seals them as Christ's people. However, the identity of the minister who performs the baptism is irrelevant.

What matters is that it is baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that it is baptism into Christ, into his death and resurrection. Given the existence of

these misunderstandings among the Corinthians, Paul is thankful that he only baptised a few of them. Had he baptised more of them, they might have been tempted to think that their baptism by Paul made them members of a special group of Pauline believers, members of a party associated with Paul.

However, Christ had not sent Paul to baptise, but to preach the Gospel. Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, a servant of his Lord, not a man forming his own movement. If he had a ministry focused upon baptism, he might have been a new sort of John the Baptist.

The people baptised by John were associated with John and many of them became his disciples. Paul baptised, but his ministry was not one of baptism. There was no baptism of Paul, as there had been a baptism of John.

Rather, Paul was the bearer of a message, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the declaration of the Kingdom and the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah. Although Paul was a profoundly gifted rhetorician, his skills clearly being on display here and throughout this letter, the point of his preaching was not eloquence, but direct presentation of the cross of Christ, where the real power lies, not in Paul's golden tongue. Had Paul's ministry been one of eloquent wisdom, the danger would have been that Paul's rhetorical gifts would have eclipsed the message he was proclaiming and the master he was serving.

It was all about Christ for Paul and anything that Paul did that distracted from that or eclipsed that would have been illegitimate. However, at the very heart of the Christian Gospel lies the reality of the cross, the stark and brutal execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a tree by the Romans. This stands in the starkest possible contrast to any religion that is preoccupied with competitive social alignment and rhetorical artistry, all of which belong to the manner of this present age.

The word of the cross is considered foolishness by all who operate on this age's terms, those who are perishing. However, to those who are being saved, it is recognised in all of its startling alienness as the power of God himself. Paul cites Isaiah 29, verse 14 here.

Beginning at verse 13, this passage reads, And the Lord said, Because this people draw near me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. This is also a theme that Jesus brings out in his own teaching, perhaps most famously in Matthew chapter 11, verses 25 to 27. At that time Jesus declared, The cross is scandalous, it's offensive, it's foolish to the sensibilities and the expectations of both Jews and Gentiles.

If you were a shrewd marketer of the Christian message, you would probably downplay all of the cross stuff, and major on Jesus as a wise teacher instead. If you emphasised

Jesus as a great philosopher and religious teacher, the Greeks wouldn't have so much of a problem dealing with the fact that he was killed by the authorities, who resisted his wisdom. They had Socrates.

The Jews could deal with a great and powerful prophet who performed mighty signs, yet was martyred by wicked leaders. There were several such figures in their history. However, accenting the cross as he did made Paul's message of the gospel seem nonsensical and offensive to both parties.

There might be ways artfully to weave the shame, humiliation and rejection of the cross into an appealing story of Jesus, but to lead with these things is ridiculous and foolish. Yet God's power and wisdom are in direct conflict with the wisdom of the world, and cannot be recognised by the wise of this age. Of course, the cross isn't ultimately foolish, but it seems as such to those of this age, who operate on this world's terms, those whose eyes have been opened by God, where the Jews or Gentiles can see it, but others cannot.

The cross, which seems the moment of greatest impotence, is the moment of God's power overcoming the world. The supposed foolishness of God is beyond the fathoming of human wisdom, and the imagined weakness of God is stronger than all of the strength of men. In speaking in such a manner, Paul undermines the forces animating the struggle for status among the Corinthians.

The cross of Christ nullifies and renders foolish the quest for status and power and wisdom that preoccupies people. It reveals that true wisdom, true honour and true power lies somewhere where people are least likely to look for it. Paul, by stripping away the pretensions of eloquence, of status and human power, wishes the Corinthians to see that the power, the wisdom and the honour always lay in the cross itself.

And in doing this he wants to accomplish a revolution in their values, which would result in a transformation of their behaviour, as they saw that the things that really mattered were not the things that they were preoccupied with, the things that led to the divisions and the conflicts among them. A question to consider, what are some ways in which we are in danger of drawing attention away from the wisdom, power and glory of God out of shame and embarrassment about the cross, seeking to appeal to typical notions of human wisdom, power and glory in their place?