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May 12th: Deuteronomy 13 & Luke 7:36-50

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Being led astray from the Lord. A woman who loved much.

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

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Transcript

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Perhaps the pattern is a weaker or more general one, and we are mistaken in expecting it to follow through exactly in every single passage. Third, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that a meaningful divergence from it is taking place. Scripture is musical and its motifs are seldom played out exactly.

Many people think that scriptural patterns are merely about the similarities between passages. However, the similarities are often there to highlight important differences. They almost invariably involve variations, divergences, and other surprises.

The patterns are real, but they occasionally set up expectations precisely in order to confound them. Fourth, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that it needs some tweaking. Perhaps in this particular instance, the material related to the first and the second commandments are mixed together.

Perhaps they overlap. There is another possibility. Holding the pattern lightly, open to the possibility that it doesn't apply in this particular instance, or may even be undermined by it, we should tentatively explore the possibility that a pattern that seems to be borne out elsewhere might fruitfully direct our attention at this particular, less obvious juncture.

Perhaps if we follow where the pattern is directing our gaze, we'll notice something that we might not otherwise have done. It is my belief that this occurs at several points in these chapters of Deuteronomy. There is material that is placed at points where we would not naturally have placed it, but when we think about why it's placed there, we find illumination.

Maybe that's what's happening here. But we should suspend judgement until we see where the closer examination of the text itself bears this out. Deuteronomy chapter 13 deals with three different cases in which Israelites might be tempted to forsake the Lord.

Following from chapter 12, which requires Israel to uproot idolatry from the land, it ensures that it is never allowed to take root in the land again. However, it might try to insinuate itself into the life of the people, it must be fiercely and uncompromisingly resisted. And the first case is that of a false prophet with lying signs.

The second is in the private statements of a close friend or relative. The third is in the apostasy of an Israelite city. They are warned about being led astray to gods that they

and their fathers have not known.

In essence, gods that Israel has not experienced in the way that they have experienced the presence and salvation of the Lord. They're warned against straying from the path that God has placed his people on. And there is, in each of these cases, an emphasis upon strong, decisive, and merciless judgement, with reasons attached.

Geoffrey Tagay observes that within the reasons, we see the lineaments of a broader theory of punishment. They must remove evil from the community, they must deter wrongdoing, they must guard the relationship between the Lord and his people. The first case is that of the false prophet.

And the false prophet is a challenge because he appears to have divine validation. He's a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, these two ways in which people might come up with prophecies and messages purportedly from the Lord. His signs, which seemingly would have been declared in advance, seem to demonstrate the truth of his message.

Now this might be a real prophet who has apostatised, or it might be a prophet who always has been a false prophet. The signs themselves might be tricks, they may be demonically empowered, perhaps they're produced through natural knowledge and abilities that others mistake for supernatural. We might consider the signs of the Egyptian magicians here.

In opposing Moses and Aaron, they perform actual signs. How are these signs performed? We don't know. They might have been performed through actual demonic activity.

They might have just been magic tricks. They might have been exploiting the knowledge of lesser-known natural phenomena. We don't know.

Maybe, in some occasions, these things might even be produced by God himself. There seem to be occasions where God is involved, at the very least, in giving some persuasive power to false prophets, and allowing people to be deluded by them. In 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 11-12, Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Moses declares that in such an instance God may be testing his people. See an example of this in 1 Kings 22, verses 19-23. And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him, on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him.

And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so.

Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets. The Lord has declared disaster for you. Perhaps the interesting thing about this is that Micaiah is telling this to Ahab himself.

He's being warned that there is this lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And so he needn't be blind to the situation. If he's blind to the situation, it's because he wants to be.

God tests his people with false prophets on a number of occasions. This seems surprising and even shocking to us. An especially unsettling example of this, perhaps, is found in the story of the man of God from Judah in 1 Kings 13, who ends up being killed by a lion for believing a false prophecy purporting to be from the Lord.

However, the Lord has already proved himself to his people. He delivered them from Egypt. He protected them and provided for them in the wilderness.

He's going to bring them into the Promised Land. The problem is that people want to go astray. And when they want to go astray, they will desire these false prophecies.

And in judgment, the Lord lets them fall prey to the delusion. He allows people to believe what they wish to believe, and makes the error really convincing to them. This is worth bearing in mind when dealing with some people.

Some people are confirmed in their willful blindness by the Lord as a sort of judgment upon them. God allows them to believe what they want to believe, and to really believe it. There's a second case, and that's the friend in secret.

There are a number of examples of the person that this could be. It could be your brother, it could be your son or daughter, it could be your wife, it could be your closest friend. All of these people who are nearest to you, that you have the strongest attachment to.

The pull here isn't that of signs and false religious authority, but of love and intimacy. This is a different sort of temptation. It's an enticing.

It occurs in secret. And it's likely an ongoing thing. We're told, you shall not yield to him or listen to him.

Yielding suggests something of the personal pressure that's being exerted over time. And you feel that pressure building up over many, many days. And you should not yield to that pressure.

The person is a traitor to the covenant, and they must be reported. All of the natural attachments, love, empathy and pity that we feel for those who are closest to us, must be resisted. People must be merciless in these sorts of situations.

The apostasy must be declared and dealt with publicly and decisively. They must report the person and deal with the issue publicly. Even if it were your own child, who you cared about more than anyone else in the world, or your own spouse, you would be expected to play the part of the witness and take responsibility even for enacting the judgement that came with that.

The secret enticement leads to a public stoning, as all of the people participate in the judgement of removing that person from their midst. The third case is that of the apostate city. And this is the most serious case in many respects.

It's an entire city that has apostatised. Such a case must be responded to with a thorough investigation of the claim, diligently establishing whether it is in fact the case. If it is the case, the entire city is subject to the ban.

They suffer the same fate as the Canaanites that went before. Israel is not immune on account of their ancestry. If they commit the same idolatry as the Canaanites, they will suffer the same fate.

Something like this happened in Numbers chapter 25 to those who yoked themselves to Baal-peor. All of the chiefs had to be put to death, unless they decisively disassociated themselves from their idolaters. I think that in reading these verses we might also get an indication of what the judgement of the Canaanites could have involved.

Any who abandoned their idolatry could be saved and could be made part of the people of Israel, could move out of the land or could be sojourners among Israel in the land. However, any who held on to their idolatry would be destroyed. So, what are we to make of the question that we started with? How does this fit into the broader pattern of the commandments? First, we should note that it continues on naturally from the previous chapter.

The previous chapter is about uprooting idolatrous worship, and this chapter is about ensuring that it never takes root again. Also, the second commandment covers the actual practice of worship, whereas the first focuses upon its proper and exclusive object, the Lord. The second commandment itself is a way in which the first commandment is enacted in practice.

After treating the exclusivity of our relationship to the Lord, we are taught how to relate to the worship of the Lord. These are principles in this chapter for maintaining the purity of the practice of worship, and so it seems appropriate that they come under the second commandment. Perhaps we could also see false prophets, family members and friends

and cities of the land as potential false mediators, things that could get between us and God and lead us astray if we become wrongfully attached to them.

I wouldn't put too much weight upon that particular explanation. Rather, I think that the answer is found in its relationship with the previous chapter, and in the way in which the second commandment focuses upon the actual practice of worship. Unlike chapters 6-11, the focus of this chapter isn't directly upon the God-Israel relationship.

It is indirectly upon that, but its more direct focus is upon the relationships within Israel itself to ensure that the true worship of God is maintained, and in that recognition I think we have moved some distance towards understanding why it might appropriately be classified under the second commandment. A question to consider. What might we learn about the potential dangers of our natural attachments with others from this chapter? How can we practice such attachments in a healthy way, without them threatening our proper relationship with God? Luke chapter 7, verses 36-50

1 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.

2 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 3 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who was touching him, for she is a sinner. 4 And Jesus answering said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you.

5 And he answered, Say it, teacher. 6 A certain moneylender had two debtors, one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 7 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both.

8 Now which of them will love him more? 9 Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled a larger debt. 10 And he said to him, You have judged rightly. 11 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? 12 I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

13 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 14 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 15 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.

16 But he who has forgiven little, loves little. 17 And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. 18 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? 19 And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you.

Go in peace. In Luke chapter 7 Jesus has been accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners. And in the next and final scene of the chapter he is eating with a Pharisee.

There is some humour and irony here I suspect. This passage juxtaposes Simon, the Pharisee and the woman. Perhaps we should see another of Luke's male-female pairs here again.

It's similar to an event recorded in Matthew, Mark and John in the final couple of weeks of Jesus' life. There it is Mary of Bethany who seems to be a member of the dinner party, rather than a sinful woman who is seemingly intruding upon the feast. In those passages the focus is upon preparing Jesus for his burial.

That's the significance of the event. The outrage is caused by the costliness of the ointment, not by the character of the woman. And the story is there closely connected with the passion narrative in each account.

It seems to me then that in addition to the fact that this is found at a very different part of the story, we are justified in saying it is not the same event as that recorded in Matthew, Mark and John. Simon, Jesus' host, is a Pharisee. We often see Pharisees simply as the bad guys, but their identity is rather more complicated and nuanced.

Some Pharisees were faithful. In Acts 15, verse 5 we discover that there were some early Christians who also belonged to the Pharisees, even as Christians. The apostle Paul calls himself a Pharisee before the council, even after his conversion.

Now when Paul perceived that one part was Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. That's Acts chapter 23, verse 6. Now Paul, to use a modern term, is clearly trolling the council here, trying to excite differences among them.

But there is no reason to believe that his statement is not true on this account. Simon could have been a fair-minded person who still had to make his mind up on Jesus. And he seems, in part, to be inviting Jesus to this feast for this reason, to discover his true character.

Jesus seems to address him as someone who is, at least to some degree, open to what he is saying. Identity as a Pharisee does seem to be an important part of the framing of the story though. The Pharisees challenged Jesus as a party for the most part, for a reason, as Jesus unsettled a number of their distinctive emphases and concerns.

The Pharisee concern for ritual purity, for instance, is an important part of this story as it is unsettled by Jesus' teaching of radical forgiveness and what that means in the treatment of the woman. Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus for a meal. And he seems, as we read the beginning of this account, to be a generous host, an upstanding religious

man of the city.

But then a woman of the city, a known sinner, comes into the group. It would seem that she has not been invited. She is described in a way that would suggest that she is a prostitute.

And what happens next is nothing short of scandalous, not just to the Pharisees, but to practically anyone within that society. She lets down her hair. She wets his feet with her tears.

She wipes them with her hair, and anoints them with her ointment. This is a familiar story, but we should recognise how scandalous this is. This action, and even more so when performed by a known prostitute, has a distinctively erotic flavour to it.

A woman letting down her hair in that society would clearly offend sexual propriety. On the surface of things, the scene seems shamelessly sexual. Simon, seeing this, thinks it must be proof that Jesus isn't a prophet.

He is not acting as a righteous man, intolerating such practice and contact, and he clearly lacks insight into the character of the woman. Everyone else knows that she is a notorious sinner and prostitute, and this prophet seemed to be oblivious to the fact. Jesus recognises this and speaks directly to Simon's thinking, showing that he can in fact understand the nature of human beings, indeed that he has far greater perception than Simon might have attributed to him.

He tells a story to Simon, inviting his judgement, a story of the cancellation of debts. And the cancellation of debts is a theme of the Kingdom Message. It's a model for understanding forgiveness.

The extravagant cancellation of debts is something that opens up the possibility of a new way of relating, a way driven by liberated love rather than by indebtedness. Forgiven a great debt, the released party is freed to respond in love. However, those who feel that they have been forgiven little can still implicitly operate in the framework of debt and its bonds and obligations.

Jesus gets Simon to cast judgement on his question, and then he turns to the woman to reveal the true nature of the situation, one that turns the picture that the reader of the passage has, and that Simon might have, on his head. Simon, who seemed like the grand and honourable host, turns out to have been rather negligent in his hospitality. As a guest of a good host, Jesus might have expected water for his feet, a kiss of greeting, an anointing of his head with oil.

Simon performed none of these acts of hospitality. However, the sinful woman performed the most extravagant acts of hospitality imaginable, performing far and above anything that Simon failed to perform. She goes to scandalous cultural extremes,

and we really shouldn't miss this.

She looses her hair, she touches Jesus, she anoints and kisses his feet, actions which were far more sexually weighted than they are today. She weeps openly. No respectable woman would do any of these things.

However, she loves Jesus too much to behave in a restrained fashion. She also performs these actions on Jesus' feet, the most humble part of the body, connected directly with the dust, honouring him in the very highest way that she can. Jesus here provides everyone with a very different way of looking at things.

No longer does Simon appear as the honourable host, and the woman as the sinful intruder, performing an unseemly and sinful act, compromising the supposed prophet. Now Simon appears to be the negligent host, while the woman is the forgiven sinner, extravagantly making up Simon's neglected acts of hospitality out of her profound love. She is covering his debt, while Jesus is the prophet who brings forgiveness and healing to those outside the camp of the righteous, in a way that shows up the unrecognised sins of the righteous themselves, revealing how little they love.

Jesus declares that the woman is forgiven. We should presume that Jesus has already interacted with her prior to this, as she seems to be responding to having been forgiven already. But Jesus' declaration of her forgiveness is not merely or primarily for her own sake, although it does reassure her.

Rather it is for the sake of everyone else. She is being publicly affirmed as one of the righteous. The challenge now is for everyone else to recognise and affirm this.

We noted earlier the sexual connotations of the woman's action. While Jesus' explanation challenges the interpretation that something inappropriate and sinful is occurring, and it becomes clear that this is extravagant hospitality and love rather than a sexual advance, her actions still have a somewhat sexual character, and it's hard to escape this. What are we to make of it? She behaves towards Jesus in a way that one could only ever really imagine a wife behaving towards a husband, for instance.

She recognises in this that the bridegroom has come to the feast. Simon, who completely fails to honour Jesus, does not. She makes up for Simon's failures by treating Jesus in a way befitting the bridegroom of Israel.

We might here think of David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel 6, when it was brought into Jerusalem. The passage ends with the woman being commended for her faith. What does faith mean in this context? We've seen elsewhere in the Gospels that it can involve persistent or pronounced confidence in Jesus' capacity and willingness to save.

In the case of the centurion, it's confidence in Christ's authority, his word. And here it

seems to be these things, but also an extravagant act of hospitality, by which Jesus is received and recognised as the one that he truly is. This is a woman who, perhaps hurt by the dishonour given to Jesus by a negligent host, makes up all that is lacking within his hospitality with her extravagant love.

She acts towards him in a way that displays who he truly is, in an act of such intimate attachment and love that could only ever be proper within the context of marriage or in the context of a relationship with someone who delivered you from all of your sins. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which a form of behaviour arising out of love, flowing from the release of unpayable and unimaginable debt, differs from a form of behaviour based upon honour and what one owes to others?