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April 15th: Numbers 11 & Mark 10:1-31

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Rebellion and the gift of the Spirit. Divorce and riches.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 16:8-13 (grumbling and quail); Exodus 16:1, Numbers 10:11 (similar timing, a year apart); Exodus 18 (the elders appointed to assist Moses); Exodus 24:1 (seventy elders accompany Moses up Mount Sinai); 1 Samuel 10:6-12 (Saul receiving the Spirit); Joel 2:28-29 (a prophecy that all the people will prophesy).

Deuteronomy 24:1 (Moses' permission concerning divorce); Genesis 1:27, 2:24 (the creational teaching concerning men and women and marriage); Mark 6:17-18 (John the Baptist in trouble for challenging Herod on divorce).

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

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Transcript

Numbers 11. And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes. And when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.

Then the people cried out to Moses. And Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them.

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving, and the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of bedallium. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in hand mills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it.

And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, every one at the door of his tent.

And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favour in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you swore to give their fathers?' 'Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat that we may eat.' 'I am not able to carry all this people alone. The burden is too heavy for me.

If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favour in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people, and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the spirit that is on you, and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

And say to the people, "Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.' Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, 'Why did we come out of Egypt?' But Moses said, "The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month.' Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?"

And the Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not." So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him, and put it on the seventy elders.

And as soon as the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue doing it. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.

And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My Lord Moses, stop them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit on them." And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp. Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. And the people rose all that day and all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail.

Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague.

Therefore the name of that place was called Kibberoth Hatheevah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. From Kibberoth Hatheevah the people journeyed to Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth. Numbers chapter 11 is set just after Israel has left Sinai.

They are uprooted from a long-term camp where they were beginning to feel a bit settled, and the struggles of life in the wilderness were somewhat alleviated. But now they are on the move again, and they feel their presence in the wilderness much more keenly. These chapters of Numbers are a litany of complaints and or rebellions involving just about every single group of the nation of Israel.

It begins with this complaint concerning the food. They miss the sort of food that they ate in Egypt, and their inclination is not to look forward to the Promised Land and the great food that they'll enjoy there, but to look back to the food of slavery, yearning for what they left behind in Egypt. The rabble, presumably the mixed multitude of non-Israelites accompanying them, had a craving, and then the Israelites join in too in their complaining.

Now this occurs after the events of Taberah, where they had complained, and the fire of the Lord had come and burnt certain parts of the camp. Moses had to intercede for them on that occasion, in order for it to die down. But even Moses starts to complain to the Lord at this point in the story.

He feels caught between what the Lord requires of him and the complaints of the people. He's the man in the middle between these two parties who aren't pleased with each other. The provision of quail is reminiscent of the earlier provision of quail in Exodus chapter 16, once again in response to the grumbling of the people.

In Exodus chapter 16 verses 8 to 13 we read, This happens at the same time of the year. Exodus chapter 16 verse 1, on the 15th day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And then in Numbers chapter 10 verse 11, Once again the manna is part of the story and it's described once more.

We've already just had a new setting apart of firstborn in the Levites, replacing the firstborn of Israel, and a second celebration of the Passover. So we're retreading the same story. However, all of the events of Sinai have intervened.

What might have been more understandable prior to Sinai is less so now. As a result of the unfaithfulness and the complaints of the people, the Lord is angry and Moses is displeased. Moses is feeling the burden that the Lord has placed upon him.

It's far too weighty a responsibility. He thinks that the people are like an infant that the Lord has deposited with him, expecting him to play the part of a nurse. Yet Moses didn't bring the people to birth.

Israel was born through the Passover and the Red Sea as the Lord's firstborn son and this was done at the Lord's instigation. Like Elijah later does, Moses sees his life as wretched and wishes for death if the situation continues as it is currently. God addresses both the despair of Moses and the desire of the people for meat and he addresses these two things together.

They are associated requests and the response to them is supposed to set up a contrast. The Lord instructs Moses to take 70 elders of the people with him to the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle. Once again we're retreading ground from the journey to Sinai where, under his father-in-law Jethro's counsel, Moses had appointed elders to assist him in his judging of Israel.

One presumes that it's most likely that the 70 elders of the people are the same as the elders that participated in the covenant meal in Exodus chapter 24. These elders would be equipped to assist Moses not just in his work of judgment as in chapter 18 of Exodus but also in his spiritual leadership of the people that they would support him in that regard. The Lord also declares that he will provide quail even though Moses finds this

hard to believe.

Moses' questioning is similar to the questions that the disciples asked to Jesus concerning the provision of food for the crowds on the occasions when Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fish. Some of the spirit of Moses is placed upon the 70 elders. The spirit is given around the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle at the very heart of the camp.

It's similar to what happens with Saul in 1st Samuel chapter 10 verses 6 to 12. Then the spirit of the Lord will rush upon you and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you do what your hand finds to do for God is with you then go down before me to Gilgal and behold I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings.

Seven days you shall wait until I come to you and show you what you shall do. When he turned his back to leave Samuel God gave him another heart and all these signs came to pass that day. When they came to Gibeah behold a group of prophets met him and the Spirit of God rushed upon him and he prophesied among them.

When all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets the people said to one another what has come over the son of Kish is Saul also among the prophets? And a man of the place answered and who is their father? Therefore it became a proverb is Saul also among the prophets? There are two of the elders who are not with the others around the tent meeting Eldad and Medad and they prophesy in the camp. This is a concern to Joshua and others who think that they may be usurping the authority that's proper to Moses but Moses is not troubled at all this is the Spirit of the Lord and he's happy to see the Spirit of the Lord spread as widely as possible. He would love to see all of the people of God have the Spirit of God and his desire here anticipates the future that God has intended for his people.

In Joel chapter 2 verses 28 to 29 this desire is expressed in the form of a prophecy that will come to pass and it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh your sons and your daughters shall prophesy your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my spirit. Then a wind from the Lord this is connected with the Spirit wind and spirit are the same word blows the quail from the sea and it falls outside of the camp about a day's journey outside on either side should note the difference between this and Exodus chapter 16 where the quail covered the camp itself here the quail are outside of the camp quite a distance away and they'll have to leave the camp and go outside to get it the quail are presented as a judgment upon the people they're given what they want but they're going to get it until they're sick of it to get it they had to leave the camp and they get their fill of quail and huge quantities of quail but they're struck with a very great plague and we should contrast God's fulfillment of these two requests one leads people

much closer to him and another allows them to be led away from him by their appetites they go out into the wilderness and they get the quail and they're struck down by a plague whereas those who are brought round the tabernacle receive the spirit and prophesy and are nearer to God as a result of that a question to consider how does the gift of Moses's spirit to the 70 elders help us in our understanding of the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 Mark chapter 10 verses 1 to 31 and he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan and crowds gathered to him again and again as was his custom he taught them and Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife he answered them what did Moses command you they said Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away and Jesus said to because of your hardness of heart he wrote to this commandment but from the beginning of creation God made them male and female therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh so they are no longer two but one flesh what therefore God has joined together let not man separate and in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter and he said to them whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her and if she divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery and they were bringing children to him that he might touch them and the disciples rebuked them but when Jesus saw it he was indignant and said to them let the children come to me do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God truly I say to you whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it and he took them in his arms and blessed them laying his hands on them and as he was setting out on his journey a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life and Jesus said to him why do you call me good no one is good except God alone you know the commandments do not murder do not commit adultery do not steal do not bear false witness do not defraud honor your father and mother and he said to him teacher all these I have kept from my youth and Jesus looking at him loved him and said to him you lack one thing go sell all that you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me disheartened by the saying he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions and Jesus looked around and said to his disciples how difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God and the disciples were amazed at his words but Jesus said to them again children how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God and they were exceedingly astonished and said to him then who can be saved Jesus looked at them and said with man it is impossible but not with God for all things are possible with God Peter began to say to him see we have left everything and followed you Jesus said truly I say to you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life but many who are first will be last and the last first in mark 10 Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea there he is asked by the

pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day between Hillel and Shammai the school of Hillel had a very extensive understanding of for any cause in Deuteronomy chapter 24 in the regulation on divorce but the school of Shammai had a far more restrictive understanding they're trying to test him part of this test may have a political undercurrent to it we should bear in mind that John the Baptist had ultimately lost his life because of speaking out against divorce in the case of Herod Antipas and Herodias his brother's wife it was a dangerous issue to speak out on and so if they could get him to speak out on this they could get him in trouble in Galilee and Perea apart from the political issues involved in teaching against divorce there were also debates among the Jews themselves concerning the subject as I've just noted in Matthew's account of this exchange debates concerning the conditions under which divorce is permissible are much more foregrounded whereas in Mark's account here it's the legitimacy of divorce itself that's focused upon Jewish scholars of those days debated the meaning of the expression something wrong indecent or objectionable in Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1 so some of the school of Shammai believe that this only legitimated divorce in cases of sexual immorality whereas others of the school of Hillel interpreted it very broadly believing that it could apply to something as minor as a wife accidentally spoiling her husband's meal so there are two things going on here there's an attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement and second there's an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the Torah and his response is to give them a question in his teaching Jesus frequently answers questions with questions or with parables we can think of the parable of the good Samaritan or of paying taxes to Caesar and his response to that in this way he challenges the questions that people ask him it's very easy to fail to perceive loaded questions or to see the assumptions that are built into supposedly innocent questions Jesus' approach to teaching often gets people to reconsider their questions and also shrewdly outwits questions that are designed to trap him or trip him up questions especially questions designed to trip someone up can often be used to defend ourselves from the force of the truth or to undermine people who trouble our conscience questions of the type that the Pharisees bring here are also often an assertion of authority relative to someone else we might recall the way that the Pharisees inquire about the disciples behavior and their failure to wash their hands before meals in that case they are asserting their authority as judges and Jesus does not actually answer their question to them rather he challenges their right to ask the question pointing out that they are people who nullify the law of God through their tradition so answering a question with a question is in part designed to turn the right to judge Christ while putting them in a position where they have to give an account of themselves the wording of Jesus' question to them is important what did Moses command you not what did Moses write concerning divorce but what is the commandment of the law on the matter note that the law is not just the 10 words or the various commandments that surround it it's the entirety of the Pentateuch Jesus' answer to the Pharisees will expose their improper posture towards the law the answer to Jesus' question differs from what he requested they say Moses allowed Deuteronomy 24

though isn't a command concerning divorce it's a concession what is the difference between these things well a concession is an accommodation to human weakness a recognition that human beings are imperfectable in their fallen state and that good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and immaturity of people and their societies good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they're designed so for instance if you're raising young kids you will accommodate your requirements to their abilities and their age of understanding and then as they grow up those requirements will increase and you'll expect greater maturity from them in the same way while we are informed by a deeper and more absolute moral law we need to have accommodation to particular circumstances and persons if you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you give to your toddlers it would not be good Jesus highlights the problem with the Pharisees response they haven't answered his question about what Moses commanded and Moses' concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce but they did not approve of it it was an accommodation to the sinfulness of human society not practice that was viewed positively we might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light these were permitted and regulated but never celebrated or encouraged these practices were never God's good intention for humanity but they were tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin weakness immaturity and imperfectibility to find out what is really commanded we have to look back further to God's creational intent for humanity and Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intention in marriage this is distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts and this distinction significantly reframes the question of divorce the hillelites and the shamites are both approaching the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the mosaic body of laws and they fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent and the result of this is a loss of a sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity divorce is a tragic accommodation a legitimate accommodation but a tragic one nonetheless to human sinfulness it's not something that is positively allowed Jesus may here contrast Moses and God Moses is the divinely inspired prophet administering the moral law in a particular historical situation but God is the author of the timeless moral law and there's a sort of legalism which snatches at all such allowances of a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards such allowances excuse us in these people's minds from the highest standard of divine righteousness that's never what they were supposed to do note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow divorce under some circumstances the allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart but they were not themselves sinful allowances the old testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible and i believe that the new testament does not simply abrogate these accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law where there are serious abuse for instance or desertion or adultery or some other such sin or failure divorce may be appropriately permitted we should also note in such circumstances that we should not

abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it while the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight it's a purposeful act that ends a marriage the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of blame for a failed marriage it may be that the blame lies almost entirely on the other side what Jesus' teaching does is not simply to delegitimize the teaching of Moses or to suggest an alternative legal code to replace it but rather to relativize it the law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily and appropriately accommodated to human sinfulness are not the north star of righteousness in mark Jesus' teaching on divorce seems to be more absolute than it is in Matthew where there are allowances made for the legitimacy of divorce in the case of adultery the lack of such qualifications in mark can help us to understand the radicality of Jesus' teaching in ways that might be unclear to many readers of Matthew in Jesus' teaching in mark especially divorce is framed not primarily by the conditions of this present sinful age but by God's creational intent at the beginning where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist including those given for adultery these accommodations are exposed for what they are they're signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity because we are a hard-hearted and sinful people God permits us to divorce in the case of adultery but lifelong permanent indissoluble and exclusive unity was always his intent and this teaching can be troubling for us we live in a society in which both divorce and serial extramarital relations are rampant it's a hard teaching today as it was in Jesus' own day we would like God to tell us that it is okay to divorce perhaps under conditions x y and z but this is not what we're told rather we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure with the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background they're tolerated but not positively validated of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage the fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce we may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace and so the church is bound both to uphold the institution of marriage and present God's grace to those in tragic situations of failed marriages and there may be the possibility of people being called back to the abandoned task of marriage to a specific person but sometimes the conditions for this simply no longer exist the end of chapter 9 of mark had a couple of instances that drew attention to children as models for the kingdom and here again children are brought to Christ and the disciples seek to prevent them being brought to Christ but Jesus rebukes them these children again are models of what it is like to receive the kingdom of God we have to receive the kingdom of God with the humble dependence of children here it should be clear that the children aren't just being brought forward as examples of something that refers to adults the children are being valued in their own right Christ blesses the children and the children are given attention here we also see Jesus doing something beyond his exorcisms or his healings he's blessing people and people are bringing children to him in order to receive this blessing many people have talked about Jesus

radical teaching and practice concerning women or the poor or people outside of Israel and all of these things are appropriate and important to talk about but along with all of these things we should talk about how radical Jesus' approach to children was Jesus is then approached by a man who asks what thing he must do to inherit eternal life and it's easy to misread Jesus' discussion with this man many have seen Jesus as highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law driving the man to despair of his righteousness but when we read the story this isn't actually what he says and to arrive at such a reading requires some considerable contortions of interpretation Jesus actually teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into life the twist in some ways is in how this is understood he highlights the second table of the law and we should note that there's no reference to covetousness rather that commandment is fulfilled in selling and giving to the poor and there's a fulfillment of the commandments on a deeper level by following Jesus himself that is how you fulfill the first table how you fulfill the duty of love to God by following Christ if the final commandment the commandment concerning covetousness highlights the greed of the man and his attachment to his possessions the call of Christ to follow him highlights also the tragic way in which those possessions have prevented him from actually serving God from loving God as he the man is a prisoner of his love for money and even when Christ who is described as loving him and calling him to follow him offers him this great honor an invitation he cannot accept it because he is so bound up with his money and he cannot leave that behind Mark doesn't have the same degree of teaching concerning riches as Matthew does but here and in other places like it he does show us the way that riches can weigh us down preventing us from serving and following our true master this naturally makes many of us feel uncomfortable we want our wealth and possessions to be off limits for Christ we'll serve him in all sorts of different ways but not if this is what is required of us wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom of God something that can master us and we should be very fearful of it of falling under the sway of things that we think we own but really own us however those who give up things for the kingdom are promised to return not just in the age to come but also in the present age and while it may be humanly impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God with God all these things are possible a question to consider what do you believe that Jesus is referring to in verses 29 and 30 truly i say to you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions