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April 8th: Leviticus 18 & Mark 6:1-29

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Laws of sexual morality. The death of John the Baptist.

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

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Transcript

Leviticus chapter 18. I am the Lord. None of you shall approach any of his close relatives to uncover nakedness.

I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother. She is your mother.

You shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife. It is your father's nakedness.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter, or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister. She is your father's relative. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother. That is, you shall not approach his wife. She is your aunt.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife. You shall not uncover her nakedness.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife. It is your brother's nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter.

And you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness. They are relatives. It is depravity.

And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive. You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife, and so make yourself unclean with her.

You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.

It is an abomination. And you shall not lie with any animal, and so make yourself unclean with it. Neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it.

It is perversion. Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things. For by all these things the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

But you shall keep My statutes and My rules, and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. For the people of the land who were before you did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean, lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.

So keep My charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them. I am the Lord your God. Leviticus chapter 18 addresses the principle of holiness to the realm of sexual relations.

This part of Leviticus is the most extensive body of such material within the Old Testament. It presents the relationships that are forbidden for various reasons, whether

due to incest, adultery, sodomy, bestiality or some other reason. The passage is bookended by statements concerning Israel's need to be distinct from the surrounding nations in verses 1-5 and 23-30.

The sexual laws, among other things, helped to mark Israel out from the other nations that surrounded them. They needed to keep these laws if they wanted to retain their right to the land. These laws seemed to have more general applicability beyond Israel, as the other nations before them were cast out of the land for failing to keep them.

Verses 6-16 concern different forms of incest, verses 17-18 relations with women who are too closely related, and verses 19-23 forbidden relations with other parties. The consequences of breaking these rules would be either being cut off from the people as an individual or being cut off from the land as a nation, the annihilation of the social existence of Israel. The same sort of concerns about proper priestly behaviour in relation to the tabernacle that we see in the earlier chapters of Leviticus are here seen in the context of the concern for proper sexual behaviour of the people in the land.

Leviticus 18 explores what it means to have sexual union with another, appropriately and inappropriately. In many ways we could see this as exploring the logic behind a man leaving his father and mother and becoming one flesh with his wife, as is described in Genesis chapter 2. An incestuous union is a failure to leave father and mother. In incest a family turns in upon itself, it's a failure to grow outwards, it's a turning inwards and the family consumes itself from within.

Marriage has a sort of sacrificial character, it's the division of an old union of flesh and a ritual passage into a new union. A man leaving his father and mother breaks an old union and becoming one flesh with his wife there's a new union that's formed. Sexual relations must navigate the reality of commonality and also otherness.

So incest and homosexual relations are an inversion of sexual relations. It's a failure to relate to otherness. It's perversely sexualising the life of the family and also the solidarity of one's own sex.

On the other hand something like bestiality is sexual behaviour where no real union is possible as the otherness is too extreme. Marrying outside of the covenant would be similar. Israel was generally endogamous, it was marrying within itself.

But we see cases like Ruth who marries into Israel from without, she's a Moabite. The important discriminating factor in such cases is not biology and ancestry but membership of the covenant. So it's appropriate for Boaz to marry Ruth as Ruth has committed herself to the God of Israel.

However to marry outside of Israel to someone who worships foreign gods is a violation of the covenant. While people strictly had to marry outside of their family they were

generally expected to marry within the clan or nation. This wasn't a rule but it was generally expected, it was the norm.

Marriages to cousins weren't opposed either. However if we look at these commandments there are some things that stand out to us or should stand out to us. Perhaps one of these noteworthy features is the fact that every member of the congregation stands in the same way in relationship to them.

There isn't a division on the basis of class nor is there some division on the basis of ethnicity. This entire body of laws is founded upon a repeated emphasis upon the Lord's sovereign claim upon his people and upon humanity more generally in the repeated I am the Lord statement. It's essential that we appreciate that these commandments were not just regulations or guidelines for private sexual behaviour.

They were about keeping or breaking the covenant. This chapter extends the sorts of principles that we see in association with the tabernacle and its worship where clear boundaries needed to be maintained and connects them with the behaviour of the body. The sorts of restrictions and requirements that we have here are not dissimilar from the sort of logic that governs the life of the tabernacle and we've already seen an association between the body and the tabernacle earlier on in the book of Exodus.

For instance the law about sexual relations with a menstrual woman seems to depend upon a similar notion of trespass into a realm that you are forbidden to enter because of its generative power. In the same way as there's a taboo upon blood because the blood is the life of the animal so the blood of the woman represents her procreative potential, something that comes from God and should not be profaned or treated as common. Verse 5 presents obedience to the law as a means to enter into life, not as a matter of earning obedience, as if by our good works we could merit salvation or something of that kind.

Rather it's a matter of enjoying the reality of life in fellowship with God as you abide in his commandments. To keep these commandments is to enjoy fellowship with God. Verse 6 is a key claim.

No one should come near any one of his own flesh to uncover nakedness. These are key terms that are used throughout the passage. Come near, own flesh, and uncover nakedness.

Own flesh refers not just to one's own body but to close relatives as well. The common expression the nakedness of is also important for understanding the verses that follow. The nakedness of the father for instance is the mother's nakedness.

It's a nakedness that isn't just exposing her but also exposing him as it is a nakedness to which he should have exclusive access. She is holy to him, set apart for him. One of the

things that this chapter underlines in the way that it treats such sexual sins is that sexuality is not private.

Sexual union and familial union means that people belong to each other and that relations with one person can violate another person. This is the logic of the sinfulness of adultery for instance. It isn't just a matter of consent and non-consent.

The body has a natural significance that isn't just given to it by consent or its lack or by choice and what we choose to ascribe to the actions that we engage in sexually. The attention to sexual relations and the body in this chapter seems strange to us as we live in a society that regards sex as casual. However scripture presents sexual relations as matters not just of ethical importance but as connected with holiness.

Paul for instance can teach that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit so it must be treated with the appropriate honour and care. It's not just actions outside of the body that matter, it's the body itself that has a value and a meaning and a significance and a holiness. Leviticus 18 doesn't present us with a comprehensive treatment of sexual morality.

It focuses particularly upon male behaviour for instance. It also focuses especially upon those women who would be within the same household as a man, protecting women in such a position from predatory patriarchs. It is also focused particularly upon unions and divisions, concerns that tend to be most central in a system that's focused upon being set apart or holy.

Another interesting feature of this body of material is that it addresses previous practices within the history of Israel. You should not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister in the same way as Rachel was taken as a rival wife to Leah. That is ruled out, it's casting a judgement back upon the previous story.

We also tend to think of sexual relations as actions outside of the body. They can take whatever meaning we ascribe to them, they're governed by principles of consent and the like. But Leviticus presents a vision of the body where the body itself is a tabernacle-like thing, a realm of presence and a realm of meeting, a realm of covering and a realm of holiness, a realm of mystery and of all, a realm of union and a realm of boundaries.

In our bodies something of the reality of transcendence is at work and a society that fails to honour the sort of transcendence and meaningfulness of the body violates the land that it dwells in. It's an interesting connection. Our bodies are bound up with each other.

Our bodies connect us to other bodies through sexual union or procreation. And Leviticus is very concerned that this is not violated. Persons who do so will be cut off from their people, a consequence that's fitting to the sin.

Our bodies bind us into a reality beyond themselves. They bind us into the reality of

procreation that is mysteriously at work in them. In our bodies the reality of our being male or female, a reality that exceeds us and that we share with others and which summons us to a horizontal transcendence of relating to the otherness of the other sex, either men or women, is also at work.

Furthermore, our bodies bind us into the union of the bonds of flesh constitutive of the family. My body, like your body, is literally an extension of the union of our parents' bodies, the physical union that they had in sexual relations that is worked out in our bodies. Our bodies are not our private plaything.

Our bodies are connected to the meaning of their bodies. Likewise our bodies are bound up with the bodies of our siblings. And all these bonds and unions must be honoured and protected and not violated or transgressed.

The connection between the appropriate treatment of the body and the relationship of the people with the land is suggestive here. The body could perhaps be seen as the land of the soul. It has its own life and patterns that must be honoured, things like the menstrual cycle.

It has its own givenness and places its own claims upon us. In the same way as the land limits us and roots us and grounds us, so our bodies ground us in relationships to other people. They ground us in the reality of a particular sex.

They ground us in the reality of a bond of bodies connected to our families. When the soul instrumentalises the body, it dishonours the body's integrity. And the holiness of the body is connected to an apprehension of the holiness of the land.

Profaning the body would also lead to a profaning of the land. A question to consider. Read Romans chapter 1 verses 18-32 and 1 Corinthians chapters 5 and 6. How does the teaching of Leviticus 18 shed light on Paul's teaching in these chapters? Mark chapter 6 verses 1-29.

He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses, and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him. And Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown, and among his relatives, and in his own household.

And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villagers teaching.

And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except to starve, no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there, and if any place will not receive you, and they will not listen to you, when you leave shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.

So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some said, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said, He is Elijah. And others said, He is a prophet like one of the prophets of old.

But when Herod heard of it he said, John whom I beheaded has been raised. For it was Herod who had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to put him to death, but she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.

And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.

And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Mark chapter 6 begins with Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth, with his disciples with him. He teaches in the synagogue and many see what he is doing, recognize the wisdom he is speaking with and the power of the works that he is

performing. However it seems as if the true recognition that this invites is immediately lost, as their presumed familiarity with his family and his origins prevents them from recognizing him.

Indeed, rather than responding properly, it leads them to take offense at him. The psychological movement here is really remarkable, yet illuminating. Jesus addresses a saying to them about the failure of prophets, hometowns and households to honor them.

The familiarity that people have with a prophet can lead them to domesticate them and fail to appreciate the power of their message. We can often attempt to do this when we encounter something that challenges or unsettles us, like the people of Nineveh, rather than moving from the remarkable character of something to reconsidering ourselves, our behavior and our thinking in light of it, we try to domesticate it, to subdue it to that which is familiar to us, to something that poses neither challenge nor threat to us. We try to put the new wine into the old wineskins, to squeeze the unsettling idea into categories that will tame it, by naming it.

This is always a danger for people who are familiar with the things of God. At a certain point, eyes can glaze over and a word heard enough times can be heard no more. Familiarity breeds both contempt and insensitivity.

Jesus couldn't do any mighty work there because of their unbelief, not because he was without the power, but because they had no faith to receive it. We should remember that Jesus didn't usually go out of his way to heal people, rather people came to him, and it's quite likely that the problem here is simply that only a very few sick people even bothered to approach him seeking healing. Everyone else, inoculated by their sense of familiarity, just stayed home.

Jesus calls the twelve here and sends them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. The accenting of that authority that they have over the unclean spirits is in keeping with Mark's treatment of Jesus as the anointed champion, doing battle with the forces of evil. They're sent out in twos, like spies preparing for the later conquest in Numbers chapter 13.

They are sent out without provisions, dependent upon the people that they are sent to for their sustenance and their supplies. It's a test of hospitality, as we see in the story of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19, or as in the story of Rahab and Jericho in the book of Joshua. If they're not welcomed, they will shake the dust off their feet, marking out the place for judgement in the future.

As they go, they extend the message of the kingdom, calling people to repent in preparation for the coming reign of the Lord, and the message is confirmed with attendant signs. News of this, Jesus' ministry and the ministry of his disciples, comes to King Herod. Herod was largely a puppet ruler, but being called king here may highlight

the conflict between two kings, or between two royal figures, like King Saul opposed the anointed David.

Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected. There's clearly a resemblance between the two. As John performed no mighty signs, we must presume that the resemblance was chiefly in the boldness and the content of their teaching.

Herod had a complicated relationship with John, which perhaps reminds us of King Saul's relationship with the prophet Samuel, who anointed David. Herod heard John gladly, even though John rebuked him for his sin in having his brother's wife. And the fact that John would rebuke Herod to his face is an indication of John's prophetic boldness.

The story of John the Baptist plays off the story of Elijah. Herod is like Ahab, he's spurred on by his manipulative wife Herodias, who's similar to the character of Jezebel. John has already been compared to the character of Elijah in the way that he dresses in his ministry in the wilderness and in other respects, so it's not surprising to us that he is presented in a similar sort of relationship with the king and his manipulative wife, in this case as Elijah had with Ahab and Jezebel.

The description of Herod's birthday feast reminds us of events in the book of Esther. In that story it begins with a feast and there are several details within it that are repeated within the story of John the Baptist and Herod. In Esther 2, verse 9 we are told Furthermore, the declaration of the king that he would give the woman who requests up to half his kingdom is something that we find in the book of Esther again.

In chapter 5, verse 3, verse 6 and chapter 7, verse 2, Herodias in this story plays a sort of anti-Mordecai to her daughter, just as Mordecai is the guardian of Esther who advises her on how to save her people, so Herodias is the one who advises her daughter in how to take the life of the prophet. And the daughter is like Esther, but a reversal of Esther, one who uses the favour of the king to destroy rather than to protect life. Herodias is also like Zeresh, the wife of Haman who spurred him on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow the knee to him.

We see this in Esther chapter 5, verse 9 and following. The whole story makes Herod look very weak too. He's manipulated by the women around him.

He's called a king, but he's not really a king and his behaviour reveals his weakness too. The head of John the Baptist is presented as if it were a platter at a feast. The flesh of the prophet is food.

This is immediately followed by a contrasting meal as Jesus feeds the 5,000. While the party of Herod feasts upon the flesh of the saints, Jesus miraculously feeds his followers. One final thing to reflect upon.

Herod was wondering whether John had been resurrected. The resemblance between

Jesus and John the Baptist was quite noticeable. However, Jesus was not John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Nevertheless, there is a foreshadowing of Jesus being put to death and of his resurrection here. A question to consider. The people of Nazareth recognise Jesus as the carpenter, the son of Mary, while King Herod recognises Jesus as John the Baptist, whom he beheaded.

What do these forms of recognition or misrecognition say about the people who make them? How might reflecting upon such bad examples help to instruct us in adopting a more accurate recognition of who Christ is?