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July 22nd: 2 Corinthians 5 & Luke 7:36—8:3

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That we might become the righteousness of God in him. Two women who loved much.

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

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Transcript

2 Corinthians chapter 5. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent we groan, being burdened, not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive

what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance, and not about what is in the heart.

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on therefore we regard no one according to the flesh. For though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians chapter 5 continues on from Paul's discussion of the treasures in jars of clay in chapter 4. There Paul spoke about the inner and the outer self, juxtaposing the two in a series of strong contrasts. Here he elaborates upon the contrast between earthly and heavenly dwelling.

Our current home is like a tent, a temporary dwelling for people passing through, but we await a building from God, a glorious edifice not made with human hands prepared for us as an eternal dwelling. Our current existence is one of groaning, of longing for the more enduring dwelling that we anticipate. At first glance some might think that what Paul is saying here is similar to what they might imagine a Gnostic saying, we need to be freed from the prison of the body.

However that isn't what Paul is saying at all. Paul elsewhere identifies persons very closely with their bodies, so although his analogy here might suggest a dissociation, that dissociation cannot be sustained. More importantly though, for Paul the greater choice is not between being embodied and not being embodied, but between two modes of embodiment, our present frail mortal embodiment, the jars of clay that he spoke of earlier, and the eternal glorious embodiment that we await.

He is not looking to be stripped of the body so as to be left naked and unencumbered by it, but in order that he might be clothed with a glorious new body. Paul describes the same thing elsewhere, Romans 8, verses 22-23 for instance, The redemption of the body, the resurrection, is what Paul is awaiting here. Some have debated whether Paul is envisioning here the reception of the resurrection body immediately after death.

I don't believe that he is. However, the way that he phrases things might suggest that we do receive the building from God in some sense upon the death of our current fleshly bodies. I don't believe Paul's primary concern here is to address or settle questions of the intermediate state.

In 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, the resurrection of the body seems to await the return of Christ. Rather, Paul's point here is that our current groaning in our bodies awaits, not deliverance from embodiment, but a much greater and more glorious embodiment. Discussion of the intermediate state might distract from Paul's immediate point at this juncture.

Nevertheless, death itself, prior to our receiving our resurrection bodies, already involves some degree of entry into the new state. We already are being prepared for this by God. God's transformation of his people is already underway through the Holy Spirit's work within us, by whom we have both a foretaste and a down payment of the fuller redemption that we await.

The condition of being in the body is one in which we are away from Christ's immediate presence. For this reason, we must walk by faith rather than by sight. Paul explores this in terms of the juxtaposition between being at home in the body and being at home with the Lord.

Paul's personal preference would be being at home with the Lord. However, the greater concern is pleasing the Lord, recognising that we must all one day give an account of what we have done in the body. Paul describes the same preference in Philippians 1 verses 19-26.

For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me, yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus,

because of my coming to you again. The suggestion in 2 Corinthians 5, as in Philippians I think, is that death removes us from embodied existence, but brings us into a more direct enjoyment of Christ's presence. It frees us from our current jars of clay and the death that is at work within them.

However, it still awaits the superior housing of the resurrection. After death we still haven't fully entered into the age to come, but we are not as grounded in this present age and enjoy to a much greater measure the anticipatory blessings of the spirit of resurrection and the life of the inner self of which Paul has already spoken. Nevertheless, as our priority with Paul should be pleasing God over everything else, we are content courageously to accept the afflictions and difficulties of life in our fleshly bodies for his sake.

Aware of how serious a matter it is to give account of the deeds performed in our bodies to God, Paul seeks to persuade others. The fear of the Lord is a powerful motivation for Paul. Living by faith, he appreciates the gravity of divine judgment and the consuming fire of God's presence, and speaks to others in a manner fitted to convey this.

Pleasing the Lord is of paramount importance. God is well aware of how Paul's heart stands in relation to him, and Paul trusts that the Corinthians too are able to perceive his sincerity and the reality of his mission, despite the jars of clay in which it is carried out. If they truly perceive the character of Paul, they would have reason to boast of the work that God was accomplishing through him for their upbuilding.

Paul makes an enigmatic statement at this point, for if we are beside ourselves it is for God, if we are in our right mind it is for you. This might refer to the contrast between the way in which Paul is caught up in the things of God, to the point of being considered a religious fanatic by some, and the rational and sober-minded counsel that characterizes much of his teaching. Paul is a man of remarkable visions, intense zeal, and religious passions, but also a man of profound and careful thought and a gifted rhetorician.

Whichever he is characterized as, however, he is not engaged in self-promotion, but acts for the sake of God and the people to whom he is ministering. Paul's practice is entirely driven and bound by the surpassing love of Christ. Christ died for all of humanity.

Every human being is somehow implicated in Christ's death, in the death of the representative man. Even though not everyone enters into the newness of life in Christ, everyone has been claimed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who live are a subset of the entirety of humanity to which Paul has just referred.

These are the ones who have entered into the newness of life in Christ. Such persons, those who are being saved, must henceforth live for Christ, rather than for themselves. Like Paul, they should be characterized by a certain selflessness in their orientation, living for the sake of Christ and for others.

After appreciating the significance of Christ's death, nothing is seen in the same way again. A new era has dawned, and everything must be viewed differently. Paul used to view everything and everyone according to the flesh, but now he does so no longer.

Differences between Jews and Gentiles, between slave and free, between rich and poor, etc. may once have loomed very large in Paul's thinking, but now he views everyone differently, in terms of Christ. Prior to his conversion, Paul also viewed Christ from such a worldly perspective, perhaps seeing him as a heretic decisively condemned by being put to death.

However, now the way that Paul sees Christ has been utterly transformed. If anyone is in Christ then, he is a new creation. Union with Christ is a central truth in this passage.

The riches that we enjoy as Christians are enjoyed by virtue of our participation in Christ. As we are united to Christ by his Spirit, that which belongs to Christ becomes ours. The expected renewal of all things awaited at the end is already at work in the Christian.

A new creation, the Christian is born again, brought from death to life. They are in anticipation of the long expected new heavens and new earth already in effect. The Christian is like a stone being fashioned in the stonemason's yard, ready to become part of a glorious edifice that will one day be unveiled.

Paul is still speaking about the nature of his ministry in this chapter, although his ministry is so completely entangled with his message that one cannot easily separate the one from the other. The new creation accomplished by Christ is from God. Through Christ, God has reconciled Paul and his companions to himself and has also given them a part in the reconciliation by which they themselves were reconciled.

God shows his grace to us so that we might communicate it to others, both in the ways that we reflect it and in the ways that we declare it. God forgives us and calls us both to forgive others and to communicate his message of forgiveness to them. Paul doesn't live for himself but has become identified with the message of grace that he bears.

It is as if God himself is appealing to people through Paul and his companions, as his ambassadors. Paul isn't a passive recipient of God's salvation in Christ but one who is actively and completely caught up in its work. The final verse of this chapter condenses the movement of God's grace in Christ into a short and powerful statement.

For the sake of Paul and those associated with him, God made the sinless Christ to be a sin offering for us. This, I believe, is what Paul means by becoming sin and he does this in order that they might become the righteousness of God in him. Behind this statement are probably the words of Isaiah chapter 53 verses 9 to 11.

What does Paul mean by becoming the righteousness of God here? There is a sort of logic of exchange at work in this verse. Christ becomes sin, we become the

righteousness of God in him. In this exchange, sin and the righteousness of God are elements standing in directly contrastive juxtaposition.

For many, this idea of becoming the righteousness of God refers to the righteousness of Christ being imputed to our account. I think this does capture some important dimension of the picture. We have a new standing with God and account of Christ and his righteousness becomes ours.

However, I don't think this goes far enough and it also fails to give satisfactory answers to certain questions. For instance, why refer to the righteousness of God rather than the righteousness of Christ? Why not rather say, he put the guilt of our sin to the account of him who knew no sin, so that in him we might have his righteousness put to our account. Paul seems to be saying something more than merely that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to our account.

We have become God's righteousness. N.T. Wright has suggested that the righteousness of God here refers to the covenant faithfulness of God, observing for instance that we consistently see God describing his saving covenant faithfulness in such a manner in the prophets. This explanation is very promising on some levels.

It fits in very nicely with the wider surrounding context where Paul has become a manifestation of God's message of reconciliation as God makes his appeal through him. However, it narrows the meaning of righteousness in a way that dulls the allusion to Isaiah 53, verse 11 that seems to be present. It also dulls the contrast with sin, which doesn't seem narrowly to refer to covenant unfaithfulness.

I think that we might move towards a solution by thinking of righteousness less as a sort of thing that we might have in our account or as an abstract moral quality and more as a positive relational standing and relational activity. Thinking in terms of righteousness as if it were a sort of thing, we can think of it as inert and inactive. Alternatively, some think of it in terms of an assessment relative to an absolute moral standard.

Yet scripture routinely speaks of God's righteousness not as if the merit in his moral account or as his absolute moral standard, his morally perfect being by which all things are measured, but rather as his powerful saving and judging activity in the world. God's righteousness is dynamic and active. God's righteousness sets things to rights.

It is this righteousness that Israel seeks when it calls God to act according to his covenant and promises. It is this righteousness that is most fully seen in Christ, a righteousness by which God sets humanity to rights in his son. Jesus talks about the need for the righteousness of his disciples to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

However, I don't believe that he is merely referring to doing the sort of thing that the

scribes and Pharisees were doing, but just more scrupulously. Rather, he refers to a radically different sort of righteousness. The righteousness in question is not one of mere sin avoidance, but a righteousness that is actively involved in setting the world to rights, participating in God's own saving work, joining in God's own work of restoration.

It is seen in forgiving others, as we have been forgiven in Christ. It is seen in pursuing reconciliation, rather than merely avoiding vengeance. As we are in Christ, the riches of his standing with the Father are enjoyed by us as his bride.

However, even beyond this, we are also being transformed into new creatures in him by his Spirit. When we act, we now act as those who are becoming Christ-like. The righteousness of God that set things right in Christ is now setting things right through us and in us.

Christ entered fully into our condition, identifying with us in our sin, so that in him we might become conduits of God's saving righteousness. This is why Paul will directly proceed to speaking of himself as a fellow worker with God. God's righteousness is not just enacted for us, but enacted in us and through us.

A question to consider, looking back at chapters 2 and 3, how does Paul further elaborate the true sufficiency of the new covenant minister that he affirmed in those earlier chapters? Luke chapter 7 verse 36 to chapter 8 verse 3. One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 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.

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 is touching him, for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher.

A certain moneylender had two debtors, one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I. Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? 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.

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

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

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Cusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means. In Luke chapter 7 Jesus has been accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners, and in the next and the final scene of the chapter he's eating with a Pharisee.

There's a certain humour to this. And this meal scene sets up a juxtaposition between Simon the Pharisee and the woman who anoints Jesus' feet. Luke is fond of male-female pairings, and perhaps this is another one that he is exploring here.

This incident is 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 an intruder to it. The focus there is upon preparing Jesus for his burial.

The outrage is caused by the costliness of the ointment, not by the character of the woman. In each of the other Gospels that story is also closely connected with the Passion narrative. It would seem then that we are dealing with a different event here.

Simon, Jesus' host, is a Pharisee. We often see the Pharisees simply as the bad guys, but their identity is rather more complex and nuanced. Some Pharisees were faithful.

In Acts chapter 15 verse 5 we discover that there were some Christians who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. Paul calls himself a Pharisee, even after his conversion. In Acts chapter 23 verse 6, In this passage Simon could have been a fair-minded person who still had to make his mind up about Jesus, someone like Nicodemus perhaps, and Jesus seems to address him as such.

However, his identity as a Pharisee does seem to be an important part of the framing of the story. The Pharisees often opposed Jesus for a reason, as Jesus unsettled a number of their distinctives. The Pharisees' concern for ritual purity, for instance, is an important part of this story, as it is challenged by Jesus' teaching of radical forgiveness.

Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus for a meal. Simon here seems to be the generous host, an upstanding religious man of the city. But then a woman of the city, a known sinner, described in a way that represents her as a prostitute, comes in upon the scene.

What happens next is nothing short of scandalous, not just to the Pharisee, but to most others. She lets down her hair, wets his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair,

kisses them, and anoints them with the ointment. This is a familiar story to us, but we should recognise the scandalous character of it.

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 manner in that society would clearly offend sexual propriety. On the surface of things, the scene seems to be shamelessly sexual.

Simon seeing this, thinks that this must be proof that Jesus isn't a prophet. He is not acting as a righteous man in tolerating such practice and contact, and he clearly lacks insight into the character of the woman. Jesus recognises this, however, and speaks to Simon's thinking.

The cancellation of debts is a theme of the kingdom, and 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, which drives so many of the ways in which we relate to each other. 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. Then he turns to the woman to reveal the true nature of the situation, and this revelation turns the whole picture that the reader has developed to this point on its head, also perhaps upending the picture that Simon had of the situation and the disciples.

Simon, who seemed like the grand and honourable host, turns out to have been rather negligent in his hospitality. As the guest of a great host, Jesus might have expected water for his feet, a kiss of greeting, and the anointing of his head with oil, and Simon performed none of these acts of hospitality. However, the sinful woman performed the most extravagant acts of hospitality imaginable, performing far over and above anything that Simon had failed to perform.

She goes to scandalous cultural extremes in her expression of her love. And we shouldn't miss this. She looses her hair, she touches Jesus, she anoints and kisses his feet.

These actions would be more sexually weighted than they are today. She weeps openly. No respectable woman would do any of these things.

They're much like David's actions in 2 Samuel 6 as he dances before the Ark. However, she loves Jesus too much to behave in any restrained fashion. She performs these actions on Jesus' feet, the most humble part of the body, honouring him in the highest way that she can.

Jesus provides everyone with a 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.

In this situation, Jesus is the prophet who brings forgiveness and healing to those outside of 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 in some form prior to this, as she seems to be responding to having been forgiven already.

Jesus' declaration of her forgiveness is not merely or primarily for her sake, although it would have reassured her. Rather, it is for the sake of everyone else. She is being publicly affirmed as one of the righteous.

The challenge is to everyone else to recognise and affirm this in their turn. We noted the sexual connotations of the woman's actions. While Jesus' explanation challenges the interpretation that something inappropriate and sinful is occurring, her actions still have a somewhat sexual character.

What are we to make of this? She behaves towards Jesus in a way that one could only ever really imagine a wife behaving towards a husband. In this, she recognises 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 fitting for the bridegroom of Israel. 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 involves persistent or pronounced confidence in Jesus' capacity and his willingness to save.

Here it is seen not just in that, but also in an extravagant act of hospitality by which Jesus is received as the one that he truly is. As we move into chapter 8, in the verses that follow, we learn that Jesus' ministry was supported by faithful women, in much the same way as characters such as Elisha's were. The women who supported Jesus also seem to have accompanied Jesus and his disciples as they travelled around.

While the focus is usually upon the twelve, Luke wants us to know that they were only some of a larger group and that the women played an indispensable role, and not just as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ. We see many women in the life of the early church involved in aspects of its ministry, as patronesses of churches, as those who hosted churches, as those who were involved in various acts of mercy, and things like that. Within the cultural context, having women accompanying around such a peripatetic teacher might have been surprising to many.

Jesus delivered these women from evil spirits and infirmities and illnesses, and they ministered to his material needs. Joel Green observes, And in the twelve and in these women, we get a sense of the type of group that is forming around Jesus. The most noteworthy woman in this group is Mary Magdalene.

While many have identified Mary with the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in chapter 7, this identification seems incorrect. However, associating the two figures in some way does seem appropriate. Both of these women are women who are marked out by their great love for Christ because of who he is and because of what he has done for them.

And it is the love of Mary Magdalene that makes her stand out later on in the story. We can so often be narrowly focused upon the question of the presence or absence of faith in the context of Christ's death, burial, and the uncertain period after his tomb is found empty, that we fail to appreciate the significance of the response of characters like Mary. With the death of Christ, it seems as though the faith of those surrounding him died with him, plunging them all into mourning.

What makes characters like Mary Magdalene shine at this time is the way that their love continued to burn fiercely in the darkness, refusing to grant the darkness its victory. In patient and enduring love, having lost all sight of her Lord, with faith and hope being utterly eclipsed, she waits out the night which promises no dawn. It was not faith so much as love which survived the long night of Easter Saturday, and it is Mary in whom this love is most visible.

One of the features of the gospel portrayal of women like Mary is their concern for the presence and the body of Jesus. We see this in the woman who anoints Jesus' feet, as we do in the way that Mary and the other women go to Jesus' tomb. The male disciples are focused more upon Jesus and his mission.

The women are more attentive to Jesus and his bodily presence. Mary goes to the tomb of Jesus, expecting to find his corpse, safely secured in its place. Now that Jesus has died, at the very least she can express her love for him in the way that she tends to his corpse by bringing spices.

John's gospel describes the tomb of Christ and Mary's visit to it in ways reminiscent of the Song of Solomon. Jesus goes down to the closed garden chamber, the spiced chamber with concealed fountain, a chamber that will be opened up allowing its spices to be carried upon the wind and its waters to go out and bring life to the world. Mary is like the Shunammite, searching in vain to find her beloved, and then finally finding him in the garden.

When Mary first encounters Jesus, she does not recognize him. He speaks to her, yet she presumes him to be the gardener. Even as Jesus is present to her, he is absent to her perception, and she knows only the continuing absence of his corpse.

If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus only truly appears to Mary when he calls her by name. As Mary finally recognizes Jesus in his loving address to her, Mary's faith, as it were, is resurrected.

This occurs as her patient love, a love stronger than death, was answered by the voice of her beloved. Just as Simon the Pharisee should have learnt from the love of the sinful woman expressed to Christ in her anointing of his feet, so the rest of the church can learn from Mary Magdalene, from the stubborn devotion of her love that survives the death of Christ itself. This woman who loved much is the first to see the resurrected Christ.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways that we can follow the example of these two women, becoming people who like them are marked out by our love for Christ?