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EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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You Shall Not Commit Adultery Exodus 20:14

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September 22, 2019 – Trinity 14

If you've got your Bibles, turn to Exodus 20:14 as we continue our study of Exodus and the Decalogue—the “Ten Words” or “Ten Commandments”. The Lord gave the *torah*—the law—to Moses to deliver to the Israelites, but these ten words he spoke directly to the Israelites themselves from Mt. Sinai. This is the core of the law. This is the core of their covenant with the Lord. These were the conditions under which they were to live in the land—*his* land—into which he was taking them.

The first four words pertain to the relation of the people to the Lord. We often call that the “First Table”. The “Second Table”, the remaining six, pertain to the relation of the people to each other. And yet both tables are interconnected. It all stems from the Lord's call to single-minded and whole-hearted devotion to him and him alone. And do you remember why? Because, as the Lord spoke in verse 1: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The Lord had shown his commitment and his love to them. The law he gave shows how they are to reciprocate his commitment and love in return. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” That's what this is about.

And so today we come to the seventh word or commandment. Look at Exodus 20:14. It says:

You shall not commit adultery.

It's another short one, just like last week's commandment. Again, in Hebrew, it's just two words: “No” and “commit adultery”. But what did it

mean to the Israelite? We need to know what the Lord was saying to them before we apply it to ourselves. And, once again, when we look at the language and the historical and cultural context, we'll see that what this meant to the Israelites was somewhat different than what it may look like to us at face value. It's important to remember that what was important to them and the reasons why things were important to them aren't necessarily the same things that are important to us. As I've said before, we tend to evaluate what is good based on whether or not it makes us happy. They tended to evaluate what was good based on whether or not it maintained order. We're talking about marriage here. Our highest value in marriage is love—and particularly the warm feelings we personally feel towards another person. That's the main reason most people get married in our culture. Procreation is secondary—or maybe even less important than that for most people. Even things like compatibility don't matter much to many. And family? Family usually has nothing to do with it. We make our own choices about whom we marry. We marry primarily based on our feelings. And if something gets in the way or someone objects, we ignore them, side-line them, or steam-roll right over them.

Ancient people—and that would include the Israelites—would think we're all absolutely crazy. Again, what we focus on in marriage is what makes us happy—which may be why we so often fail at marriage. The single most important thing for them was order. They married to maintain the family. Procreation was one of their highest priorities. When it came to whom they married, their feelings had little if anything to do with it—feelings developed later as they grew to know each other. They married to keep property in the clan or to amass property by bringing two families or clans together by marriage. And it was parents who typically made these arrangements. Honouring those decisions fell under the heading of the

fifth commandment: Honour your father and your mother.

So while marriage is marriage whatever culture you live in, what we value about marriage shapes how we view it and it's also going to shape how a commandment like this is understood. In the Ancient Near East, adultery referred to sexual relations between a man and a woman who was either married or betrothed. Hebrew is no exception. We see this in the way the Hebrew word for adultery is used in the Old Testament. For example, Leviticus 20:10 says:

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

It's not that the Old Testament doesn't address other sorts of sexual sins. It does. But adultery as they defined it—a man having relations with a married woman—was uniquely disruptive to marriage and family in their cultural context.

That this was a capital crime highlights just how significant it was to them and to the Lord. This wasn't unique to Israel. Adultery was a serious crime across the Ancient Near East. Death was the penalty pretty much universally. When Abimelech confronted Abraham after he'd passed off Sarah as his sister, Abimelech referred to the adultery that could have resulted as a “Great Sin”. There are texts from Ugarit and Egypt that use the same language. Why? Because adultery strikes at the most basic unit in society: the family. And the family is essential to maintaining order. A lot of people today will write that off as old-fashioned and out-dated—again, if your personal happiness is your highest goal it's hard to understand what's wrong with adultery—but just look at our society today. Chaos is fast becoming the order of the day and we can trace almost everything to the disruption of marriage and family. Our society is increasingly trying to put the State in the place family once

occupied, but doing so is proving an utter failure. I'll come back to this later.

Now, a lot of people who are critical of the Bible argue that the reason why adultery in the Old Testament is focused on sexual relations between a man and a married woman is that it's all about women as property. But there's very little evidence in the Old Testament that this is what it was about. Again, the focus was on order and preserving the family—and not just the immediate nuclear family, but the extended family, including future generations. When it comes to “property” there was more emphasis on inheritance and lineage than on daughters and wives. Sirach writes of the “woman who leaves her husband and presents him with an heir by another man” and says, “First...she has disobeyed the law of the Most High, second, she has committed an offense against her husband; and third, through her fornication she has...brought forth children by another man...She herself will be brought before the assembly, and her punishment will extend to her children. Her children will not take root, and her branches will not bear fruit” (Sirach 23:22-26). The rabbis echo these concerns in their writings. It wasn't about violating the husband's property. It was, first, a violation of the Lord's commands and, second, an act of treachery. In fact, the people put it on par with murder. Here's what Job said:

**The murderer rises before it is light,
that he may kill the poor
and needy,
and in the night he is like a
thief.**

**The eye of the adulterer also waits
for the twilight,
saying, ‘No eye will see me’;
and he veils his face.** (Job
24:14-15)

Again, these attitudes were pretty common across the ancient Near East,

but one aspect of this that seems to have been unique to Israel was the seriousness of the penalty. The *torah* condemned both the man and the woman to death. That was common. But in most other cultures, the aggrieved husband had the right to commute the sentence. He could choose to let his wife and/or the man who had relations with her off the hook. Not so in Israel. And the reason for that is that it's not just the aggrieved husband who has been sinned against.

Think back again to Sirach. The first thing he said the adulterous woman had done was to disobey the law of the Most High. Yes, she sinned against her husband, but that's down the list. Think of King David in light of this. He committed adultery with Bathsheba. Now, David knew the penalty. He and Bathsheba would be stoned to death—that's the penalty spelled out in the *torah*—if they were caught. That David feared this highlights the fact that in Israel, the King was not above the law. Even in the depths of his sin, David knew that the Lord was Israel's true King. But because he feared being caught, David had Bathsheba's husband murdered. He compounded his sin. Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord confronted David with his sin. David repented. Psalm 51 is David's song of repentance. And there he cries out:

**Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your
sight.** (Psalm 51:4)

Now, David didn't sin against the Lord and the Lord only. He sinned against Bathsheba. He sinned against Uriah, her husband. He sinned against his own family. He sinned against the people when he lied to them. What David says here is a bit of hyperbole. He knew that he'd sinned against all these people, but he also knew that he had sinned *first* and *foremost* against the Lord.

This goes back to the covenant. The Lord had claimed the land as his own. He had declared it holy. And he claimed Israel as his own and declared her to be a holy people. Only a holy people can live in a holy land in the presence of a holy God. The Lord reminds the people of this in Leviticus 20. He gives a long list of abominations—of unholy acts. In that list he includes adultery in verse 20:

**And you shall not lie sexually with
your neighbor's wife and so make
yourself unclean with her.**

And at the end of that list of abominations the Lord says:

**Do not make yourselves unclean by
any of these things, for by all these
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.** (Leviticus 20:24-29)

The Lord gives a vivid picture. I remember being sick as a dog after eating some bad teriyaki at the café where I worked in Portland. I unwittingly poisoned myself, and in an effort to get rid of the offending substance I vomited it out. A lot. Over and over and violently. That's the picture the Lord gives here. He will not tolerate unholiness in his presence. He will vomit it out in disgust. What he's talking about is exile, but the image of vomiting an unholy people from the land is a lot

more powerful and memorable than just saying, “Make yourselves unclean by these things and I’ll exile you to Babylon.”

I expect this image was running through David’s mind when he was caught in his sin. He wasn’t just an ordinary Israelite who had sinned. He was the King. He was the corporate representative of his people. If the sins of ordinary people would get the whole nation in trouble, imagine what the sins of the King might do. I think this explains the earnestness with which David got on his knees in repentant and pleading prayer. Adultery was—and still is—serious business.

The Lord uses the image of adultery throughout the prophets to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness to him and to the covenant. Long before that, all the way back to Exodus the covenant language the Lord uses with Israel is the language of marriage contracts and vows. The Lord is “jealous” and “impassioned” when it comes to his people. Israel’s idolatry in worshipping the golden calf is her “Great Sin”. When the Lord confronts Israel for her worship of other gods he speaks of her “whoring”.

In Hosea, however, the Lord calls on the image of adultery to make a powerful point about Israel’s apostasy and unfaithfulness. He instructs Hosea to marry a prostitute. Her name is Gomer. Hosea loves her, but Gomer doesn’t love Hosea in return. Repeatedly she abandons him for other men. And, repeatedly, Hosea goes out into the city, searching for his beloved, and each time her finds her brings her back to his home to lovingly care for her. It’s a powerful illustration of the Lord’s lovingkindness and his covenant faithfulness. But it’s also a powerful indictment against Israel and her unfaithfulness. Jeremiah and Ezekiel use similar imagery. Jeremiah writes about Israel’s “whoring with many lovers”.

Ezekiel describes Jerusalem as a murderous nymphomaniac. Her abominations are so horrible that she makes Sodom look righteous in comparison.

And, I think, that’s a good point to make our way into the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the Lord stresses the seriousness of the sin of adultery and then he uses that sin to illustrate the seriousness of Israel’s unfaithfulness to him and to his covenant. And the connection made there in the Old Testament begins to get at why marriage and the family are important. On one level they’re vitally important for a healthy, functioning, and ordered society. This is what God ordained when he saw that it was not good that Adam was alone and then made Eve as his companion. This is what God ordained when he brought the man and the woman together and said that “a man shall...hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). But why did God establish things *this* way?

This relationship between husband and wives, this relationship that maintains old families and creates new ones, this relationship through which new life comes into the world, teaches us about covenant faithfulness. As we are faithful in marriage, this institution ordained by God, teaches us something about our relation to him. In Ephesians 5 St. Paul writes:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

And to husbands he writes:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:25-33)

These are some of the most beautiful and encouraging words in all of Scripture. If there’s anything that inspires me to love my wife beyond her own loveliness and love for me, it’s that my love for her is here compared by Paul to Jesus’ love for the Church—of Jesus love for me. On the one hand, my natural love for my wife gives me a taste of Jesus’ love for the Church, but on the other, I’m also reminded that Jesus’ love for his Church and for me isn’t dependent on what I do or how perfect I am. Jesus died for us—died for me—when we were his enemies. And if that doesn’t inspire us to love each other and to seek reconciliation where our relationships are broken—in marriage and, no less, in every other relationship we have—I don’t know what will.

Have this in mind when you think of Jesus’ teaching on this commandment. Just as Jesus reminded us last week that murder begins in the heart long before it plays out in the hands, so does adultery. In the Sermon the Mount he says,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

The implications are gut-wrenching, especially when you think of the modern-day proliferation of pornography. It's not just the woman we see by chance while going about our business or the neighbour or co-worker we regularly linger on with our gaze. Men today can instantly call up gigabytes of virtual women to lust after anytime and anywhere. It's everywhere, even if you avoid it online. It's on TV. It's in movies. It's on billboards. Jesus says to love your wife as I have loved you. Jesus calls us to real love. Love with commitment and obligations. Love that's hard work. And we're surrounded by cheap fantasies that require no commitment, no hard work, no sacrifice. And it's increasingly around us as real-life women try to compete for our attention by taking on the trappings of the unrealistic fantasies today's men obsess over. And it's killing our marriages, it's killing our families, it's killing our society. Even in the Church. I know, it's a problem for women too, but it's particularly a problem for men. But Paul's clear: Men, it starts with us and it ends with us. Brothers, think on Jesus' love for you. Think on the cross and the sacrifice that Jesus made for you there out of love. And then love your wife the way that Jesus loves you. Jesus has loved us and we love in return. And so with our wives. Paul gives us the reality: Love your wife and she will love you in return. Again, Husbands, it starts with you.

In closing, let me also say that there is hope when we are fallen and broken as so many are and as some of you may be. As heavy to bear as Jesus' word are when he reminds us that we're

guilty, that we're sinners, even when we haven't physically done the deed, Jesus also gives us hope. That's the Good News. In John 8 we read about Jesus coming on the scene of a stoning. The town elders have dragged a woman out of the gate. She was caught in adultery and was about to die for it.

There was a good measure of hypocrisy there in that scene. Where was the man? Why wasn't he also being stoned as the law demanded? And we get a sense of glee in these men at the prospect of executing the sinner, rather than mourning. There was no sense of "But for the grace of God, there go I". But the key point of the story for John was that for Jesus, this sinful woman represented Israel. God's people had turned their backs on him. God's people had worshipped other gods and other agendas. And they'd done it over and over and over again. And to those people came Jesus, just as he approached that woman guilty of the "Great Sin", as it was known in those days. Jesus confronted the leaders of Israel with their own unfaithfulness as a people and they dropped their stones and walked away in shame. And to the woman who remained he said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Brothers and Sisters, that's what Jesus came to do. He doesn't wink at sin. He doesn't turn a blind eye to sin. He doesn't excuse sin. The sin of his people cost him his life. The sin and unfaithfulness of his people nailed him to the cross. But by his death he bought forgiveness for his people. By his death—and by his resurrection—he has made a new people for God. He confronts us with the full weight, the full sinfulness of our sin, but if we will take hold of him in faith, he forgives our sin and leads us into new life. "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin more."

Let's pray: Gracious and loving Father, you have loved us when we did not love you. You gave your Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We ask this morning that you would keep us always mindful of your grace and of Jesus' cross, that your love for us would shape every relationship in our lives and, especially, our marriages, that they might be models to the world of your love and of your grace and of your new life. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.