



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

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**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, March 17, 2013**  
*The Fifth Sunday in Lent*

*Choral Evensong  
at 4pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels  
on  
Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18

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*Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News*  
*SERMON 8: NO ADULTERY*

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

After several weeks of this sermon series on the Ten Commandments, we finally get to a racy one. Of all the commandments, “no adultery” seems to be the one that garners the most contemporary discussion, and I imagine it always has.

But adultery as something between husbands and wives isn’t what we read about the most in the Hebrew Scriptures. Adultery as a sin comes up even more frequently and significantly when writing about another kind of unfaithfulness: that of Israel toward God; Israel “cheating” on the God who loves them, and this kind of promiscuity is frequently described in sexual terms. So, while the location of the seventh commandment clearly marks it as an instruction about human sexual fidelity, in our consideration of the seventh commandment, perhaps it would be enlightening to look at God’s relationship with Israel and ask what we can learn from it for our relationships.

It may be surprising to hear the rupture of the relationship between Israel and God described in terms of human sexual promiscuity and adultery, but it is actually highly appropriate. The love that God has for Israel is described in the scriptures as a passionate love, of a kind much closer to erotic love than we might ordinarily think. The scandalous text in the Song of Songs, for example, is one instance of an allegorical description of God and Israel as two besotted lovers, hungry for their enjoyment of one another. We may shrink back from such comparisons—they may seem profane to us—but this discomfort is a Puritanism of a fairly recent vintage; patristic and medieval theologians, for example, wrote on this topic in a way that may give a contemporary Christian a case of the vapors.

To identify God’s love of Israel in such terms, however, seems to beg a question: why? Why was, and why is, God so crazy about Israel? We can see in the Bible that it’s not because Israel was the greatest nation; not because it was the strongest nation; not even because it was the best-behaved nation, the most faithful nation, the most ethical. God fell in love with Israel in that inexplicable way that falling in love works. Who can say why? “Why does she put up with him?” we sometimes ask. Or about another couple: “Talk about opposites attracting!” No explanation is offered, except God’s own graciousness. Love, even God’s love, is a strange thing.

Since he has fallen in love, God makes a covenant, first to Abraham, that he promises he will honor, no matter what. “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” No matter what. This is all well and good early in the relationship, with Abraham and Sarah, who believed in the Lord and followed the plan that God had set out for them. Everyone was on their best behavior, and it seemed like all would be happy ever after. But what about later?

The prophets tell us what about later; Jeremiah is an example. The word “adultery” comes from the combination of the prefix “ad”, which means “toward,” and “alter”, which means, “other.” Towards the other, and that is just where Israel had turned by the early seventh century BC. They had turned towards foreign gods, towards idols, and away from the God who had promised his ever-lasting loving-kindness to them, the God who was the source of not only their creation, but their liberation. When things became difficult for them—they were lost in the wilderness; they were attacked by enemies; they didn’t prosper as they had hoped—they left home and sought comfort elsewhere, not only in violation of the covenant, but against their own interests. Separating themselves from that which gives them life.

In Jeremiah, after Israel’s abandonment, God describes himself as a broken-hearted husband, grieving over the loss of the one he loved so much. There are images of anger, hurt, even despondency, at the betrayal he was experiencing. “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” he had said. But the sons and daughters of Abraham had broken their promise, and it wasn’t clear that they would ever come return. Two things are made very clear: both the pain that abandonment causes God, and the negative effects that infidelity has on Israel itself. They don’t find what they’re looking for in their foreign gods; their lot becomes worse, not better. The richness of Israel’s relationship with God would be nourishing, but Israel instead makes a covenant with death, not with the source of life. What was intended for Israel’s good, and what had the potential to make Israel great, Israel had turned away from.

Jeremiah paints a terrible picture of the results. That turn toward the other tainted what was meant for good. It adulterated the purity of that relationship, and the results were devastating.

Faithfulness to God and faithfulness to one’s spouse are very different; but they have much in common, too. The commandment against adultery isn’t only a commandment against something; it’s also a commandment for something: for that kind of life-giving relationship of faithfulness; the nourishing nature of covenantal relationship that makes possible the fullest expressions of human life.

There’s also one other aspect of God’s faithful relationship towards Israel, and Israel’s unfaithful relationship towards God, that we may find illuminating. In the beginning of Jeremiah, after outlining the charges against her, God announces his divorce of Israel; given her betrayal, and refusal to change, there is no possibility of that broken relationship continuing. It is over. But then...

As the book continues, it’s made clear that the excoriation of Israel for its infidelity is not an end in itself. Even in the midst of the prophetic condemnation, God calls for Israel to repent and return to the one who loves her; and he loves her still, even in his pain. And if she will do that—if she will only come back—God promises to forgive her. God promises to restore their right relationship with each other. In fact, God promises to break the laws in Deuteronomy prohibiting marriage after divorce, in order to effect their reconciliation. It may seem like reconciliation is truly impossible, and that their relationship is as dead as dead can be. But in the midst of this death, God promises, through his own gracious will, a resurrection of their love. God’s forgiveness of betrayal is revealed to be the underlying message of the whole book: the accusations, threats, pleadings, and promises, are revealed to be part and parcel of his intention to forgive, for the covenant to be restored, for the relationship to be life-giving once more.

God's capacity for forgiveness is much more vast than our own, and there's no sin in someone being angry when they've been hurt; no sin in anger and even, perhaps, being unable to forgive. Nor does God ask any of us to be doormats, to be taken advantage of, to be manipulated through religious appeals or any other. Such restoration doesn't happen in an instant; it didn't for Israel, and it doesn't for us. Nonetheless, if we're looking at God's broken relationship with Israel as the model of human broken relationships, we can see that the love of God can reconcile through grace when reconciliation seems impossible. That, after all, is what salvation through Christ is all about: reconciliation when reconciliation seems impossible.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.