

Hospitality: The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah
Genesis 19:1-25 and Romans 12:9-13
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In my young adult years, I was a person on the move. Having grown up in Wisconsin, I spent ten years on the east coast as a young adult. The first four years were spent in college in western Massachusetts. After that I moved to the Boston area and was renting the upper story of a house in Cambridge for a time. The landlord had such a thick Boston accent, I had to really concentrate to understand him. Maybe he felt my Midwestern way of talking was equally hard to understand. All my years living on the east coast, I always felt like an outsider. You'd have to live in Massachusetts several generations or two before to be considered a native. It was clear I was not from around there. It felt good to move back to Wisconsin when I came back in 1985.

Today in the Hebrew scripture we heard about a man named Lot. Lot was a man on the move. He and his uncle Abram (later called Abraham) had come from Ur to the land of Canaan. In time Abram and Lot go their separate ways. Abram generously offers his nephew choose which part of the land will be his. Lot chooses the lush Jordan River valley. But Soon Lot is captured by enemy kings. Abram has to rescue him. Lot then settles down in Sodom. Lot was not from around there. And the men of the city knew it. Having recently been a stranger himself, Lot welcomes two strangers who come to town and need shelter. I imagine Lot remembered what it felt like to be dependent on the good will of others as a guest in a new place.

Hospitality: it was both an ancient near eastern custom and a Biblical value to take care of people on the move. In the harsh desert climate hospitality was often a matter of life or death where food and drink could be very scarce. You offered hospitality because you might soon be the stranger. The men of Sodom wanted to do harm, not good, to Lot's guests (guests who turned out to be angels sent by the LORD). When Lot tries to protect the visitors, the men of Sodom say "this fellow (Lot) came here as an alien and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." In this story **all** the men of Sodom wanted to do the strangers harm. "But before they {the visitors} lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.'" (Genesis 19:4-5) This was mob psychology-- when individuals lose their sense of morality, swept up in the collective, giving over their sense of personal responsibility to the crowd. Did the men of Sodom resent Lot for making his home with them? Was part of their wanting to do harm to his guests rooted in resentment towards Lot, who 'wasn't from around there'?

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most widely quoted passages from the Hebrew scripture. Here is the origin of the phrase “fire and brimstone.” Genesis 19:24 reads “Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven....” Or, so reigned down “fire and brimstone” as it reads in the King James version. Most likely Sodom was south east of the Dead Sea (or Salt Sea), an area was known for its sulfur and other petrochemical springs, as well as bitumen deposits. Some scholars speculate that the description of “sulfur and fire” or “fire and brimstone” showed the possibility of an earthquake which ignited fires and set these mineral deposits ablaze.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two sides of God are seen: God’s judgment and God’s mercy. There are consequences to sin. So what exactly was the sin of Sodom? This passage has commonly been has been to condemn acts of male homosexuality: “bring them out to us so that we may know them” – “to know” being a euphemism for sexual relations. What’s going on here is in fact sexual assault by a group. The threat of sexual violence is not the sin that leads to Sodom’s destruction by the LORD. The LORD had already decided to destroy Sodom before this even happened. This threat of sexual abuse –just illustrates Sodom’s sin which was already well known to God.

We can see this when we go back to the second half of chapter 18. In Genesis 18: 16ff. the LORD tells Abraham that Sodom is going to be destroyed because it’s such a sinful place. Here Abraham starts pleading for Sodom, bargaining with God: “Lord, if you find fifty righteous people, will you save the city?” “OK, God says, if there are fifty righteous men in Sodom, I won’t destroy the place.” “How about forty five? Would you destroy the city if there were forty five righteous men?” “No, the LORD says, I won’t destroy Sodom if there are forty five righteous men.” And Abraham gets the number down to twenty. But in the end the LORD does destroy Sodom and the twin city of Gomorrah.

So, God had already decided to destroy Sodom before this threat of sexual violence by the men of the whole community against Lot’s guests. The what was the great sin of Sodom? To answer that we need to look at some of the places in scripture where “Sodom and Gomorrah” is used as a code for sin. The list of sins Sodom included

- Lack of concern for the poor and the oppressed; disregard for the plight of the orphan/widow (Isaiah 1:9-10, 11-17)
- Adultery and lying (Jeremiah 23:14)
- Cruelty, idolatry, ignoring the hungry; excessive wealth (Lamentations 4:6)
- Pride, income inequality (Ezekiel 16:48-55)
- Lack of hospitality (Matthew 10:14-15 and Luke 10:12)
- And general lawlessness (2 Peter 2:8).

God’s destruction of Sodom is punishment for this multitude of sins. But God’s mercy is evident in this story too. Lot and his family are spared. When the angels

finally get Lot to leave Sodom, they tell him to go and live anywhere on the Plain; Lot pleads to be able to find refuge in a city instead. The angels relent and tell him to go to the city of Zoar. Later Lot becomes afraid of staying there too, so he and his two daughters find shelter in caves just outside Zoar.

Before I give my interpretation of this story of Sodom and Gomorrah, let me say I could be wrong – both those who agree and those who disagree with me are invited to come and have conversation with me after worship over a cup of coffee in fellowship hall. I am still learning. There's still so much I don't know. As I read it, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about hospitality – and what it meant to have a right relationship with God. It's a story about righteousness.

Lot and his uncle Abram were men on the move. Both were righteous – but Abraham more so. Showing hospitality to strangers was a sign of righteousness (being right with God). Offering hospitality was what giving alms to the poor would be for later Jews: it was a sign of righteousness: sharing what you had with those who were without – so everyone had enough.

Abraham's righteousness was seen in the generous hospitality he offered to three strangers (who turned also out to be angels). We'll hear that story in two weeks. In today's story, Lot offers welcome to the strangers. but his righteousness didn't measure up Abraham's. Attempting to deter the men from doing harm to his guests, Lot says this to the men of Sodom: I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' (Genesis 19:7-8) Some of the sinfulness of Sodom must have rubbed off on Lot, to offer that his daughters become the victims of sexual assault instead of the male guests.

Many interpret the sin of Sodom as homosexuality. I believe this is a misreading of this story. The sin of Sodom was not the individual actions of one man with another sharing an intimate, sexual encounter based on love, and respect. It was a collective act of sexual assault. Our ancient Hebrew ancestors had no way to understand what psychologists know today as sexual orientation. In ancient Hebrew culture, homosexual acts were one thing: acts committed by heterosexual men which were contrary to nature, because these sexual acts did not result in procreation. The furthering of life was a Biblical value, in part because the Israelites were a tiny minority in the land of Canaan, and there was a need to grow the population. The sin of Sodom was not homosexuality. Their sin was not being right with God, as seen by their not caring for the vulnerable ones among them.

Abraham and Lot were men on the move. And they were individuals who tried to do the right thing, tried to do what was pleasing to God. The Bible teaches that hospitality (how we treat strangers) is a gauge of our relationship with God. Strangers symbolize the ones in need, the vulnerable ones among us. In the next few weeks we'll continue to explore hospitality in the Bible and how our actions

towards guests reflect our relationship with God. Next week, our celebration of Confirmation Sunday, we'll hear about a time when Jesus showed generous hospitality to the disciples.

So here's what I hope you will take away from this sermon today: our story – the human story -- is the story of people on the move. That includes our Hebrew and our Christians ancestors. The letter to the Romans was written by one of those; by a man who in the last years of his life never stayed in one place very long. This was the apostle Paul. He wrote these words we heard today: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection;Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. " Jesus was a man on the move, an itinerant rabbi who had nowhere to lay his head; yet he was hospitable. Today we are invited to his table; the table of grace, where the banquet has been prepared. All are invited to this table, where we are nourished by the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

Here sinner and saint both find a welcome for on the night before he died, as he ate with his closest friends, he welcome even the one who would betray him. We are both his faithful disciples and the ones who betray him. We are the ones who have done things to please God, and we are the ones who have left things undone the things which God would have us do. None of this is a barrier to us being welcome at this table. Christ invites us all, no matter where we're from, no matter our language or accent. Thanks be the God, who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our morning offering will now be received as we prepare our hearts to be his guests at his table.