

It's About Hospitality
Genesis 19:1-11
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Last week we began a series of looking again and reading again with the intention to look at Biblical texts, some familiar and some troubling, and to reexamine what we have heard about them or the assumptions we have made about them.

Last week's text came from the very beginning of Genesis – the creation story. Today we remain in Genesis, but a little further into the story. And, as Bruce reminded us before reading this passage, this text has some troubling things both within the story itself and in how it has been used.

So, before we begin this conversation, let me propose an approach we might take. This approach comes from our Jewish friends and their concept of Midrash. “*Midrash* is a Jewish rabbinical interpretation of scripture. In the Jewish community, there is this appreciation for differences and contradictions and questions that are left in the text. If you encounter a difficult passage, it's like, ‘oh, let's talk about this!’ The Bible is treated like a conversation starter, not a conversation ender.”¹ And, as Rachel Held Evans points out, “This is very different from how [many] Christians tend to approach the Bible. [Many] treat it like a zero-sum game. [Like a] text has *one* correct meaning, so we take sides on what that meaning is and then we fight to the death over who's right.”²

¹ Rachel Held Evans in an interview at <https://rewire.news/religion-dispatches/2018/07/06/youre-using-wrong-rachel-held-evans-returns-bible/>

² Rachel Held Evans.

But, if we instead take the approach that difficult passages or difficult details in passages give us an opportunity to talk, to explore, to look at the contradictions and questions and see what we can learn, then we might find something new in these old stories.

So, over the coming weeks, I will continue to remind you of this and ask that you walk with me on this journey as we let the text *start* our conversations rather than *end* them. *And* I invite you to remember that sometimes that means we will walk away with new ideas, sometimes with ah-ha experiences, sometimes with our traditional thinking challenged, sometimes with more questions than we started with. And that is not only okay, but I would suggest that it is good.

So, let us turn our attention to today's story. This story is most frequently referred to by the names of two towns – Sodom and Gomorrah, although technically only one is named in the part of the story we read, but the two are associated with each other and destroyed at the same time later in the chapter. And many of us don't know much about these communities. If we do think we know anything about Sodom and Gomorrah, it is generally one of two things. We might remember Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt at the time of Sodom's destruction. And, more likely, we might have the idea that this story and the example of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of the Bible being against homosexuality.

Meanwhile, knowing of this story because of what we've heard about either Lot's wife or about the supposed bigotries contained here is not that same as knowing the story. Thus, we are reading again and looking again to see what is really here and what word God might offer us in the midst of it.

So, let's take note of a few things.

First, if we look at what comes before chapter 19 we will see that Sodom really becomes important in the Judeo-Christian tradition back in Genesis 13 because it is the place to which Lot, the nephew of Abraham, moved when Abraham and he decided that they would be well served to settle in different areas.

Sodom and Gomorrah are two towns in the same general area and are places that, along with several other towns, are allied when they have common enemies. We hear mentions of both of these places and associations they have, but then in chapter 18 we hear that Yahweh plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if the outcry against them proves to be true. And, if we read that part of the story, we find Abraham arguing on their behalf, or at least on behalf of the righteous who may be among them, likely, we assume, thinking of his nephew Lot.

So, basically what we know about Sodom and Gomorrah going into this story is that this is the area where Lot and his family are living and that the people of Sodom are already – before what we read today – identified as wicked.³ They are already, if you will, on the God's naughty list.⁴

So, it is into this context that the visitors come to Sodom in the first place. And, as Bruce read to us, these two show up in town and there they meet Lot who is sitting by the city gate. Lot, a relative newcomer to this community, invites them to stay at his home. We are not told whether this is simply motivated by a good old fashioned near eastern commitment to hospitality or if Lot himself knows how wicked the townspeople are. But either way, he does what was common and invites the strangers to his home to be fed and to rest.

It is while the visitors are at Lot's home that the other men from the town gather outside the home demanding access to the visitors. And let us be clear – they are not wanting to have a

³ Genesis 13:13, NRSV.

⁴ Genesis 18:16-33.

meet and greet, they are not wanting to welcome new people to their town. Rather, they find their way to Lot's home with the intention of acting violence upon the guests.

And it is so important that we hear what it is they are asking for. When we read the passage it is clear that the men of the town come to Lot's home as an angry mob. They ask for the visitors to be surrendered to them, and the language of our translation is "so that we may know them"⁵ And, yes, that is Biblical translation for sexual activity. But, again, let us be clear, this is not consensual, this is not relational, this is about perpetrating violence on people who they consider to be outsiders, who they see as less valuable.

And, one of the painful and too often ignored things about this text is that part of how we know, from within the text, that this is not about homosexuality as we think of it, is because Lot offers his daughters as a substitute. If this passage was about homosexual people or even homosexual practice, Lot would not think that the men would be just as content to rape his daughters. But, see, if we read the story, rape is really what the men intend to do and that is about violence and power and control.

Even elsewhere in the Bible, this story is connected with the sin of inhospitality and mistreatment of those who don't have enough. Perhaps most clearly it is named in Ezekiel where, "the real 'guilt' of the Sodomites was the fact that, although they had 'pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease,' they 'did not aid the poor and needy' and [they] were 'haughty' (Ezekiel 16:49-50).⁶

One of the things that we often forget about the Biblical context is how extraordinary was the concern for care of the stranger and for care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. These

⁵ Genesis 19:5, NRSV.

⁶ Rev. Patrick S. Cheng, PhD at <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-patrick-s-cheng-phd/what-was-the-real-sin-of-b-543996.html>

were of great value in ancient near eastern culture. The Judeo-Christian tradition is grounded in these values.

So, “it should be no surprise that radical inhospitality was a sin of the first-order magnitude in the Ancient Near East. Taking care of the sojourner or traveler in the midst of a hostile desert environment often meant the difference between life and death. According to ancient Jewish texts, such as the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Genesis Rabba*, the inhabitants of Sodom were infamous for their cruelty and their failure to support the poor and the needy in their midst, as well as their failure to practice charity and justice. Extra-biblical stories included the Sodomites’ physical torture of travelers as well as their burning of a young woman who had dared to share food with a family that was starving of hunger. This is in stark contrast to Lot’s radical hospitality, or the radical hospitality of Abraham and Sarah to the three disguised angels who visit them in Genesis 18, the chapter that immediately precedes the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative.”⁷

One of the things that happens when we read a text such as this and tell ourselves that it is telling us that one group is wrong, is that we are usually assigning that identity to a group that is different from us, a group that isn’t the dominant culture and of which most of those making the rules aren’t part. If we tell ourselves that this is a story condemning homosexuality, then it becomes easy for us to draw a line and people on one side are condemned while those on the other side are set free. But this is not faithful to the text.

The more honest *and* more challenging position is to realize that this is a story about how all of us treat the stranger in our midst. This is a story about how share what we have – or how

⁷ Rev. Patrick S. Cheng.

we choose not to. This is a story about how we value the one we consider to be other – or how we choose not to.

One of the practices we should always remember, especially when struggling with what a text says or what other people are saying about it, is that we should lay that text next to the larger themes of the Bible and, as Christians, we should lay that text next to the values and actions of Jesus.

While some will tell you that this is all about condemning homosexuality, there is little evidence that that is true. Yes, this story condemns gang rape – although it unfortunately leaves us wanting when Lot's offer of his daughters shows us that it is only condemning gang rape against the visitors and not against the young women already in their midst. And there we are reminded that this was written in a very different time when women were valued differently and as modern people we must think critically about this remembering that scripture reflects the time in which it was written even when those realities aren't what God desires. This story condemns the violence against the visiting men but it in no way understands or addresses homosexuality as an orientation nor does it address committed same-gender relationships. Those things were simply not a part of the ancient worldview nor were they part of this story.

When we are willing to set aside the misinformation and bigoted perspective that this is all about homosexuality, what we find is that not only are we more in line with both the greater themes of the Bible, where hospitality is of central importance, we are also in line with the life of Jesus, one who spoke often of care for the outside but never of homosexuality.

But the other thing that happens is that we allow ourselves to be challenged. Because when we really listen to what is being said about Sodom and Gomorrah, when we really listen to what is being condemned, then we have to ask ourselves difficult questions.

How do we welcome the stranger?

How do we treat the outsider in our midst?

When do we turn our backs on strangers and on those among us who are struggling?

How are we called to respond?

These are questions that arise from this story and these are questions that we find throughout the Bible as our faith points us time and time again to open our homes and our hearts to the stranger, the struggling, the outsider, the least of God's children.

May it be so.