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*Uncensored: The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah*

Matthew 10:5-15; Hebrews 13:1-2; Genesis 19:1-17, 24-29

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Before our third scripture reading, some context: One day, Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent on a hot, hot day, and saw three strangers nearby. He then proceeded to show those strangers some five-star hospitality, according to the standards of the day. He got up, ran towards them, bowed down, and invited them to sit and rest, and have their feet washed. He prepared a magnificent feast and served it to them in the cool shade. The entire time, he respectfully addresses the men as “my lord,” and refers to himself as “your servant.” The strangers turn out to be angels, messengers from God, and tell Abraham that his 90 year old wife, Sarah, is going to have a son, which is another story for another day.

Then, God and Abraham have their famous conversation, where the Lord begins by saying, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!” And Abraham wants to know if God would spare the city if there are fifty righteous people in it, and God says, yes, if I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, I’ll forgive the whole place for their sake. Again, this is a wonderful story for another day, but the end result is that after some brilliant diplomacy on Abraham’s part, God finally says, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

As we hear our third scripture reading for today, from Genesis 19, let us remember, then, that already, someone—probably many someones—had been crying out for justice against the city of Sodom. Listen now for the word of the Lord . . .

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to throughout the rest of the Bible more often than any other story from the book of Genesis, which is saying something because this is the book that tells the creation story, Noah and the Ark, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, the Joseph story, and more.

Sodom and Gomorrah are used as the “gold standard” of badness in the Bible. If you really want to criticize a nation, compare them to Sodom and Gomorrah.

The story serves as a warning. It is possible for evil in a community to reach the level that you just can't turn it around anymore. In this case, it got so bad that God simply could not allow that community to stand even one more day. The best that could be done was to get the tiny number of so-called righteous people out of there.

Generations later, when Jesus tells his disciples that a town that won't welcome them is worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah, those are strong words indeed.

So what, exactly, was so bad about Sodom? Some people have pointed to the fact that the men of the town wanted to have sex with what they believed to be two men staying at Lot's house (remember, the men were actually angels). They have cited this story in support of the claim that homosexuality and same-sex intimate relationships are immoral. This is an unfortunate interpretation, mainly because it's wrong.

This is not a story about two men or two women who love each other. There's nothing in this story about men even being attracted to each other. The story says that ALL the men of the city, both young and old, EVERY man, no exceptions, surrounded Lot's house. It's hard to imagine a town where all the men are homosexual. Statistically, only 5 to ten percent would have fallen into that category. This is a violent gang that

wants to sexually assault two foreign men in order to humiliate them. That kind of sex IS an abomination, whatever the gender of the victims may be. Fortunately, the angels intervene and nobody falls prey to sexual violence in this story, not even Lot's virgin daughters, who will get their own sermon next week.

When we look at what the rest of scripture says about Sodom and Gomorrah, we find very little reference to same sex relations, and far more statements like this one from Ezekiel, in which the prophet addresses the people of Jerusalem: "As I live, says the Lord God. . . this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it." Again, rape of any kind is always abominable, if indeed that is what Ezekiel was even referring to, since other things can qualify as abominable – like child abuse and elder abuse.

Instead, the great sin of Sodom seems to be its failure to show hospitality. If you compare the gracious welcome the angels received from Abraham and Lot with the hostile behavior of the men of Sodom, well, it just couldn't be more different.

Does anybody remember the 1990 movie "Pretty Woman"? Julia Roberts plays a prostitute named Vivian and Richard Gere plays the wealthy businessman named Edward who hires her to be his escort for a week. Edward gives Vivian a wad of cash and sends her out to get a dress for a formal dinner meeting. She tries a store on Rodeo Drive, but the salesperson refuses to help her, because in the salesperson's mind, Vivian doesn't belong there.

The next day, Edwards goes with Vivian for the shopping, different store, and this time, Vivian is waited on hand and foot with the greatest respect and leaves with more shopping bags than she can carry. Impeccably attired, she then returns to that first store, and says to the salesperson, who clearly does not recognize her, “Do you remember me? I came here yesterday, and you wouldn’t help me.” Vivian then says, “You work on commission, don’t you?” “Yes,” the salesperson replies.” “Big mistake,” Vivian says. “HUGE.”

It is a big mistake—HUGE—to mistreat someone that we think doesn’t belong. Scripture could not be more clear. In Leviticus, God tells Moses to command the Israelites: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” In Deuteronomy: “The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

We know that hospitality was a sacred moral obligation in ancient times. It was the most basic human responsibility. It was not about elegant table settings or free wi-fi, but welcoming strangers, caring for their needs, and offering protection.

We don’t know ALL the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the particular crime of Genesis 19, the one that seals the deal, is that two angels, in the form of men, come to Sodom and take shelter with Lot. And instead of providing refuge, the men of the town

break the code of hospitality and attempt to assault and humiliate these strangers, not to mention their treatment of Lot, who is himself an immigrant in need of protection. The men of Sodom do the opposite of loving the alien as themselves.

What a rich passage for reflection in this day and age.

In describing this particular sermon series, I wrote that we would be sure to talk about what some of these more sordid stories of the Bible can teach us today. I hope you can already hear some ways in which this particular story might speak to us in this day and age, living as we do in a nation where most of us are descended from immigrants and all of us are concerned about our country's immigration policies.

I hope that one takeaway from today's look at Sodom and Gomorrah is the freedom to disregard inaccurate interpretations that use this story to condemn homosexuality. The gang rape attempted in Sodom has nothing in common with loving, committed same-sex relationships and marriages. Furthermore, to blame the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah on homosexual acts distracts from the brutality and oppression that are the real villains in this story.

Another takeaway might be the invitation to look at our own lives, and our own communities, and the way we welcome strangers . . . or not. I keep going back to example of Abraham in Genesis 18. There's so much we can learn from just that one example. He sees strangers, and what? Does he run into his tent and close the flap? Does he pretend to be napping? Does he wait to see where they're headed? NO—Abraham runs. He RUNS to them. Lot didn't do too bad—Lot ROSE to greet the strangers, but Abraham RUNS. Just as if the best thing that could possibly happen to him

that day would be for three complete strangers to happen along so that he can bow before them, address them as though they are royalty, oversee the preparations of a sumptuous meal, and wait on them as they eat it. Because they are strangers, their well-being is his responsibility, and he treats this as a great honor and privilege. And as luck would have it, the strangers are angels. It makes me wonder how many angels I may have missed welcoming into my life over the years, in my preoccupation with protecting myself and not letting people take advantage of me.

I invite you this week to join me in doing at least one thing to welcome a stranger. To show love to them. Normally when I end a sermon with a challenge, I offer some practical suggestions for how to do that. I'm not going to do that this week, because I think part of the challenge includes figuring out what that means today for you. I will tell you, however, that one of the most moving examples of hospitality I experienced was when I visited an elderly man in the hospital, when I was doing Clinical Pastoral Education, and he could not speak, but it was very important to him to make me feel welcome, so he offered me part of his breakfast. I believe with all my heart that hospitality is everyone's responsibility and privilege, and anyone, anywhere, can offer it.

The good news is that as we do, we might even meet some angels.