

Sermon Text for October 11, 2015

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Luke 10:8-12, Genesis 19:1-11, 15-17, 24-26

“What happened at Sodom?”

Today we have an opportunity to read and re-examine one of the most misunderstood passages in all of Scripture. It is the story of Sodom and Gamorrah. You need to know that the prevailing issue in many of the main stream churches in the United States today that is monopolizing our time, resources and energy is the topic of homosexuality. In seminary we discussed it ad nauseum and even had two groups set up and we would meet, discuss, go to dinner together and discuss some more.

After seminary we had a 4 year hiatus when we served in Italy for 4 years and it was never discussed in that context. We moved to Florida and for 8 years it again became the most dominant issue of discussion and for 5 years I spent some time speaking in churches, Presbyteries and gatherings over this one issue.

One of the things that I looked forward to the most when we served in Moscow was not having to discuss this issue ad nauseum but rather allowing it to fade to the background as one of the many issues that we struggle with in our Christian life.

Since today we happen to be on Sodom and Gomorrah which is a Scripture that historically churches have used to boost up a certain stance in regards to that debate, what we will learn is that what happened at Sodom and Gomorrah is not because of the sin of homosexuality as most of us have been raised to believe but rather it revolves around the issue of hospitality or the lack thereof. This Scripture and a plethora of other Scriptures depict hospitality as one of our central tenets of the faith. Even Christ in his Luke Scripture speaks of those who refuse to offer hospitality as facing a worse fate than those living in Sodom and Gomorroah. Without opening your heart and your life to invite Christ in as Lord, then you will never allow yourself to open your life to those around you.

So, if you came today for the juice and controversial topic of homosexuality, you will leave disappointed because that is not what this Scripture covers.

When I think of hospitable places in the world, Southern Italy comes to mind. I miss sitting around a dining room table for hours upon hours just eating and spending time together. Each culture has a different take on hospitality. In some cultures

hospitality is only extended to those within the immediate blood family. In other cultures anyone who may be a stranger is welcomed in the door and given food to eat and a place to rest their body. For some reason this summer I realized that I have celebrated my birthday in 10 different countries where I had spent my birthday: Portugal, US, Italy, Honduras, Nicaragua, Czech Republic, Austria, Jamaica, Russia, Belarus, and Texas.

I figured for this reason, since I've celebrated my b-day in 10 different countries, I should be somewhat conversant on this topic of hospitality. How have people welcomed me, made me feel at home. What has been the means to make the stranger feel comfortable even though he may be a total stranger?

I know when we lived in Moscow we were on the frontlines of gathering information on how people of color were treated in the capital city. BBC and Reuters picked up our report and what we discovered was the inability for people to welcome the other in their midst.

Members of our church would be attacked, called monkeys, and it would make you want to shake the dust off of your feet. More than any other time in my life I came to understand the reason why Scripture places so much importance on welcoming the stranger as a brother and sister. Today here at First Presbyterian Church, and at our homes living here in Lancaster County we need to ask the question, are we fulfilling the command of what it means to extend hospitality to all?

As I prepared for this sermon it kept coming back to me that hospitality is absolutely central to the Gospel message. And since I had planned to preach on Genesis 19 I noticed that hospitality, or lack of it, is the answer to the question of what happened at Sodom and Gomorrah. Many people today use Genesis 19 as a proof text to show what God's judgment is for homosexuality. Let's be clear, I have been slammed by both sides for my understanding of Scripture on this matter. I do view homosexuality as a sin which squarely puts me in one camp. It is a sin as greed, adultery, coveting, lying, and the other sins that Paul lists in Romans and Scripture mentions in the 10 commandments as well as other places in Scripture. So I clearly fall on the bad graces of many Christians when I say that I believe that Scripture is painfully consistent in condemning homosexuality as something that could never be blessed by God.

But on the other hand, in Palatka Florida I had 5 churches gather together to pray for my salvation and for the salvation of those attending First Presbyterian when I said in the papers that the church is responsible in large part for the current attitude of the society

toward gays and lesbians as we tend to be the most hostile toward this demographic group. When I said that churches needed to take the lead to provide a welcoming place and a home for all people especially gays and lesbians, I was placed among those who didn't know Christ, this Scripture of Sodom and Gomorrah was thrown at me, while the Scriptures that speak of the doctor needing to spend time with those who are sick like we are sick from sin was often forgotten.

Having said all that, frankly speaking, this Scripture's primary message and its primary emphasis is not about that explosive topic but rather about the very ordinary and powerful issue of hospitality. I hope that isn't disappointing to you.

I have always understood Scripture as a dandy little rarsnock test. You can understand a lot about people by the way that they interpret Scripture. Although many of us were raised with the understanding that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their propensity to homosexuality, we find that instead as we study this Scripture they were destroyed because of their lack of hospitality. Isaiah 1:10-17 tells us that the destruction of Sodom was a result of injustice found in that city. Jeremiah 23:14 lists a number of sins for why Sodom was destroyed including adultery and lying, and homosexuality is not mentioned. Ezekiel 16:49 states very clearly "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 the needy."

So how did we get the idea that Sodom and Gomorrah is all about, you know...So much so that our vocabulary has adopted a word to describe acts associated with homosexuality. Where did that common understanding come from? Not Scripture. Scripture defines Sodom and Gomorrah as very sinful places. We have defined that Scripture to mean something different.

I think one of the reasons why is that maybe it is easier for us to think that homosexuality was the sin that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because most of us are not homosexual. But what if Ezekiel is right that it was destroyed because of pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and ignoring the poor and the needy, well then we are the ones in trouble.

Let's look at the Scripture. I'm amazed that the description of those who come to the door is seen 4 times. The men...Lot tells the men who surround the house to "do nothing to these men for they have come under the shelter of my roof." As the host, as the one who meets them at the city gate and invites them in he then becomes responsible

for them. In the Near East hospitality to a stranger was paramount because one day you too might be a stranger, a guest in somebody's house.

So when we are shocked to hear Lot offer one of his daughters to protect the visiting men we need to understand that Lot is taking God's commandment of hospitality so seriously that nothing else matters. This passage should shock us just as Abraham's offering of his son Isaac. This passage should shock us just as Japeth's sacrifice of his daughter. They are all examples of obedience to God at all costs. Once Lot places himself under God's protection and guidance he has committed himself to observe God's commandments, including the commandment of hospitality, in this case.

Brothers and sisters, look around the room. What do you see? Do you see a stranger, a foreigner. Do you see someone in need of a hospitable hug or a generous outpouring of compassion and welcome. I would love to reclaim this Scripture and its original purpose which was the fact that who knows, you may be hosting angels without knowing it.

I think especially Americans we have lost a lot of our understanding of hospitality. When we first came to this country we were worked together to make sure that everyone was able to make it. But today in America our hospitable nature has changed and we become angry, upset, threatened like those men of Sodom forcing our way when we hear someone speaking Spanish in public. When we feel as if our way of life is threatened and our neighborhood changes around us, we get defensive. Hospitality is still a sign of God's presence in our lives whether it be toward our neighbor or the stranger.

Our reading in Luke reminds us of our role not only as individuals in our own homes but also as a church and a community to not welcome but to actually host those who are in our midst. As we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior we need to understand ourselves as strangers relying solely upon the grace and mercy of God for our survival. We are but guests on this earth and so we need to open our lives, our church to those with whom we come into contact. What if this church were to become an actual place where people who were without a home could stay and use our kitchen or the well or the bathrooms. Maybe this is a ministry of hospitality. Lot was able to, but the people of Sodom were not. As the authors of Hebrews states: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

What happened at Sodom could very easily happen here if we are not open to receiving and accepting all of God's children, all of God's sinners in our midst. May God bless us and keep us we look to become an even more hospitable people. Amen.