

Message for June 3, 2018

“Two Twists to an Old Story”

Paraphrase of Genesis 15-19

Prayer:

1. We love to tell stories. Stories are important to our understanding of life and many stories that we tell our children and grandchildren really reflect just what we believe. We tell stories about our lives and our wishes and dreams. Many of the stories we tell come from the Bible. We may change the stories from the Bible somewhat to fit our understanding or wishes about the outcome.
2. For the last several weeks we have been looking at the easy stories in the Bible – Jonah and the Whale, Noah’s ark and Baby Moses and the Bulrushes.
3. But today we begin some difficult Bible stories that cause us to squirm and question what they really mean to me and how do they affect my faith in God.
4. For some people, today’s story of Sodom and Gomorrah is the first example of homosexuality in the Bible and God’s abhorrence of this. Most people only read two very troubling verses and then draw their conclusions about the entire story. This is similar to reading the preface to a book or seeing the trailer of a movie.
5. But, there is more to the story.
6. Some of these stories, especially the one today about Sodom and Gomorrah, will give us cause to reflect because this one is of primary concern in our society and especially in the United Methodist church. The root understanding of this story causes us to pause and to really try to understand what it means and how, as godly people, we should react in our day to day interactions with all people.
7. Let me tell you the story about Abraham and Lot – Abraham’s nephew. We find this in Chapters 15-19 in Genesis.
  - a. Nine generations from Noah have now passed, and God calls a man named Abram, living with his wife Sarai in Haran, a city in upper Mesopotamia.
  - b. God makes a covenant with Abram, promising to make Abram’s descendants into a great nation – his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens,
  - c. Abram agrees to leave his home and move southwest to Canaan (Israel) with his wife and his nephew, Lot, to a land that God has promised to give to Abram’s descendants.
  - d. Abram takes up residence there and erects a number of altars throughout the land as symbols of his devotion to God.

- e. After a brief stay in Egypt, Abram becomes wealthy and returns to Canaan, where, with the help of only 318 men, he defeats a legion of marauding armies from the East that has descended upon Sodom, where Lot is currently living.
  - f. The king of Sodom recognizes Abram for his great deed, and the priest Melchizedek blesses Abram with a gift of bread and wine.
  - g. Abram returns home where God speaks to him again regarding his covenant. Abram's descendants, as God reminds Abram, will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.
  - h. A ceremony is performed in which God passes a blazing pot through pieces of sacrificed animals, symbolizing that his promise will not be broken.
  - i. The writer of Genesis notes that God considers Abram's faith in God as a form of righteousness.
  - j. Sarai is old and cannot become pregnant, but she wants to give her husband an heir. To this end, she sends her handmaiden Hagar to sleep with Abram and Ishmael is born. This is Abram's first son. When Sarai becomes upset because of Hagar's contempt, the handmaiden flees in fear. God speaks to Hagar and comforts her, promising her a son and Hagar returns to give birth to Abram's first son, Ishmael (16:12).
  - k. Once again, God speaks with Abram, this time commanding Abram to remain blameless in his behavior and adding a new requirement to his everlasting covenant.
  - l. Abram and all his descendants must now be circumcised as a symbol of the covenant, and God promises Abram a son through Sarai. The son is to be called Isaac, and it will be through Isaac that the covenant is fulfilled. God renames Abram "Abraham," meaning "father of many," and gives Sarai a new name, "Sarah."
8. **One day, God appears to Abraham in the form of three men, but Abraham only sees the men. He does not understand that the men are God's angels.** The three men say that Sarah will have a son, but Sarah, who is now ninety years old, laughs.
9. **Abraham welcomes these men to his home and prepares a lavish feast for the men.** It was the tradition in the ancient East for every family to welcome the sojourner, the traveler --- this was a necessary code of hospitality.

10. After, the resting at Abraham's home, the three men travel toward the eastern cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destroy the cities because of their flagrant wickedness and corruption.
11. Abraham pleads on the cities' behalf, convincing God – through one angel-- not to destroy the cities if only 10 good men can be found there. Abraham starts with 50 good men and works God down to 10 good men. Abraham is able to change God's mind.
12. The men (angels) enter the city of Sodom, and Lot welcomes them into his home and prepares dinner for them. Lot extends the tradition of hospitality to the strangers.
13. *And now the key verses that give Sodom and Gomorrah their lasting reputation.*
14. *Genesis 19: 4-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*
- <sup>4</sup> But before they 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; <sup>5</sup> 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. (may mean sex – other translations say sex)" <sup>6</sup> Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup> and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> **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. (REALLY!)**" <sup>9</sup> But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup> But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. <sup>11</sup> And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.*
15. The angelic messengers persuade Lot to flee the city with his wife, and daughters. His betrothed sons-in-law refused to go with Lot. telling him and his family not to look back as they leave. However, as God rains down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife looks back at her home and is turned into a pillar of salt.
16. And finally, after Lot and his daughters are safely in a small city named Zora, at the daughter's instigation, Lot has sex with his daughters so that they can further the family.
17. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is wedged between the stories of Abraham and Sarah and then the birth of Isaac. We will stop here.
18. Wow! Just about everything our society lives with today occurs in this story.
- a. Homosexuality
  - b. Gangrape

- c. Mob violence
- d. Incest
- e. Inhospitability

19. As I have pondered this disturbing story, there are clearly two key items, two twists to an old story that stand out to the reader --- homosexuality and hospitality.

20. We ask ourselves – what is, or are, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah?

21. The first twist to this story is that in light of the passage in verse 4-5, the most common response to the question "What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?" is that it was homosexuality.

- a. Clearly, homosexuality was **part** of why God destroyed the two cities.
- b. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah wanted to perform homosexual gang rape on the two angels (who were disguised as men). What is difficult to understand is that Scripture says that **ALL** of the men wanted to "know" the two men who were with Lot in Lot's house.
- c. It is hard to believe in Twenty-first century that **All** of the men wanted to engage in these perverted sexual practices.
- d. It seems that uncontrolled sexual practices were prevalent with the population of Sodom and Gomorrah. And that seems to be the main focus of this verse.
- e. Consider what Lot's suggests as he wants to protect the men that were in his house. Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd of ranting men. Why in the world would Lot do this? And of course, there is no scripture explanation of his actions. ---- There are many suggestions that Lot felt that his daughters would be rejected by the crowd, because the prevalent sin was that of to sexual immorality and perversion. But we really do not know what the answer is, and any thoughts would only be conjecture. This is a very tough story to understand.

22. Now, at the same time, it is not biblical to say that homosexuality was the exclusive reason why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were definitely not exclusive in terms of the sins in which they indulged.

23. Here is the second twist to the story: **Inhospitability!**

24. We read in Ezekiel 16: 49-50 <sup>49</sup> *"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. <sup>50</sup> They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore, I did away with them as you have seen.*

25. So where do we find the examples of inhospitality in the Sodom and Gomorrah story? We don't! Only in other texts like the Ezekiel do we find other explanations of the sins of these cities.
26. What this means is that the population of Sodom and Gomorrah were more concerned about themselves and their own welfare and prosperity that they were not willing to be generous with the stranger. Lot was being generous!
27. So some of the thinking is that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their love of themselves – “What mine is mine and what is your is yours” – no sense of sharing or concern for others – especially the other person.
28. Two different twists to a complex story.
29. So, what does this mean to us today in 2018?
30. Well, first the issue of homosexuality is still very contentious in our society. Our views and acceptance are changing but there is still a long way to go in fully accepting the gay and lesbian persons.
31. Our United Methodist Church is struggling as to how to become an inclusive church and still not fracture into different churches. We split over slavery in 1844 and it took almost 100 years to heal the fraction. We have been racially divided when we established the Central Jurisdiction which was composed of black churches. It took until 1954 for the Methodist church to agree on the ordination of women and even today some of the United Methodist Churches do not want a female pastor with all of the spiritual depth the women bring to the pulpit.
32. Even this past week, the Baltimore -Washington conference Bishop Easterling had to rule that two people who were practicing homosexuals were not eligible for ordination because of the law in the Book of the Discipline.
33. Bishop Easterling's comments were that “all persons are sacred in the eyes of God” and that we are to love all people even if we do not agree with them.
34. Jesus is very clear about hospitality. Consider Matthew 25:31 and following: -- <sup>31</sup> *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. <sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited*

me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. <sup>37</sup> "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' <sup>40</sup> "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. <sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. <sup>44</sup> "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' <sup>45</sup> "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. <sup>46</sup> "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

35. So, here we have the tension in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. There are two aspects to the story ---- homosexuality and hospitality.
36. What is God saying to us in this story? I believe it is about judgment. How do we judge people who are different from us?
37. Throughout Scripture, we read that God wants us to love our neighbor, to love our enemy, to love the stranger and to use compassion. Jesus makes specific statements on this as was just read in Matthew.
38. This love, this compassion for the stranger starts with us. Do we reach out to others who are different than we are – who have different religions, who are of different races, who are socially lower or higher than we are, who have different sexual preferences than we do? Our answer may indicate just what depth we are a Christian.
39. Our hospitality can begin with ourselves and extend into the church.
40. Our hospitality can extend into our community and our state.
41. Our hospitality can extend into our nation that seems, at this point, to be receding backward from our founding principles.
42. The old hymn sums it up right. --- "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."
43. Thanks be to God.