

November 22, 2015
Affirming Sermon Series - 2
Genesis 19 (selections)

Sodom and Gomorrah. We all know what this passage is about, right? We have such an unconscious cultural understanding of this ancient story, that references to it are ingrained in our language: Sodomize. Sodomite. Sodomy.

You don't even have to have read the bible to know what this passage is about: homosexuality. The sin of Sodom – the curse which completely destroyed two entire towns.

Does it even bear examination?

Yes, friends, it does. This particular passage from the book of Genesis is one of the key scripture passages referred to when you hear people say, "It says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin." It says in the Bible. And the Bible is our authority – for some it is even the inspired word of God. We need to take it very, very seriously.

And we need to know what it says. In the next few minutes, we are going to look carefully together at what it really says – not just what we think it says, or what we have always been told it says – what is really there.

We are doing this today because our Affirming Team has the Council's support to engage our community in an honest, open, kind and compassionate conversation about becoming an Affirming Congregation.

This is the official name for a community which has consciously chosen to welcome people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. We are not yet an Affirming congregation – although we are very welcoming. We will have the opportunity to decide whether or not to take this step, some time in 2016.

Before then, there will be at least 4 sermons on biblical texts, and further opportunities to engage in public events, like the one held last Saturday with

educator Joan Grundy. Let us each take personal responsibility for ensuring that this is a community where we can differ respectfully, where we can name our own truth with humility, and where we can listen to others with compassion. Only communities that care do this work. I congratulate you!

How do you cook a ham? How's that for a change of topic? How do you cook a ham? A little girl was learning to cook by watching her mother. "Mummy," she said, "why do you cut the ends off the ham before you put it in the pan?" "That's the way my mother did it," said the little girl's mother. "Go ask her." So, she went to her grandmother's house and asked, "Grammy, why do you cut the ends off the ham before you put it in the pan?" You know what her grandmother said? "That's the way my mother did it, go ask her." So, the little girl went to her great-grandmother's house and asked again about cutting off the ends of the ham. Her great grandmother said, "I have to do that, because my pan is so small."

Isn't that a great story? I think it's a great story about traditions, and assumptions and about human nature. How often do you find that you're never so sure of being wrong as when you're sure you're right?

On that note, let's get back to old Sodom and Gomorrah, and let's start with the huge assumption which we have inherited about this text: that the sin of Sodom is homosexuality.

Lot meets two angels disguised as men in the gateway of the town where he lives. In the ancient Middle East hospitality was held in the highest regard. You took in the stranger and gave them shelter and food if you could. You never knew when you would be in the same boat yourself one day, needing protection from a stranger down the line.

Lot takes in the two men and is honour-bound to provide for them while they are in his house. But before too long, THE MEN OF THE CITY, THE MEN OF SODOM, BOTH YOUNG AND OLD, ALL THE PEOPLE TO THE LAST MAN, SURROUNDED THE HOUSE; 5 'WHERE ARE THE MEN WHO CAME TO YOU TONIGHT? BRING THEM OUT TO US, SO THAT WE MAY KNOW THEM.'

Now this is a despicable request, but take a careful look at what it says: ALL THE MEN... BOTH YOUNG AND OLD... In other words, every last man in the city has gathered outside Lot's house and is demanding that the two men inside come out. Every single man is there. What are the chances that every man in Sodom at that time was gay? Every man? It's impossible, right? That's not even true of San Francisco – probably the gayest city on the planet right now. It certainly wasn't true of Sodom back then.

These men, the young and the old, haven't come to ask for the strangers at Lot's house because they feel sexually attracted to them. They have come as a mob. They have come to violate them. They have come to humiliate them – there is nothing here about homosexuality – which is a sexual orientation – and everything here about gang violence – which is a choice.

Lot comes outside his house and tries to talk down the crowd - brave guy. But when he sees they won't be dissuaded from their goal he says this, 'I BEG YOU, MY BROTHERS, DO NOT ACT SO WICKEDLY. 8LOOK, 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.'

Things are going from bad to worse here. Lot somehow decides that it is *less horrible* to offer the mob *his own daughters* than to allow the strangers who have taken shelter with him to be surrendered to the angry mob. This is an incomprehensible choice to our modern sensibilities. But remember the appalling status of women in those days – and remember also the absolute code of hospitality. Lot is so honour-bound to protect the strangers that offering his daughters is the *lesser evil* in this situation. We struggle to understand that.

Let me draw your attention to another little detail in the text: Lot offers the mob outside two *women* to appease their appetites. If he thought the crowd was gay what would be the point of sending out two women to them? Here is another clue in the text itself that this is not about homosexuality at all – the men in the mob are straight.

So, what's really going on here? An angry mob has gathered and plans to sexually violate two strangers. This is not about love or attraction or relationship or tenderness or mutuality. This is about hatred. This is about humiliation and brutality.

Do we have any experience of this at all? You bet we do. Perhaps you can recall some of the horrible humiliations which took place in the Iraqi prison called Abu Ghraib, perpetrated by American soldiers. Iraqi prisoners, who are protected by international laws regarding prisoner safety, were humiliated and sexually abused by both male and female prison staff. The point of all of this, obviously, was to express domination over the enemy, to degrade them and to humiliate them in the worst possible way.

What was the sin of Sodom? Do you know that there are 20 references to Sodom in the rest of the Bible – 20 times when later writers referred back to this particular story as an object lesson, and basically said: don't do what they did. Not one of those references has to do with sexuality at all.

Listen to this one from Ezekiel: 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. (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

Pride. Excess of food. Not aiding the poor and the needy. Being haughty. Those were the sins of Sodom. Turning against the stranger, not providing hospitality, being brutal. Those were the sins of Sodom, as later writers in the Bible understood them.

So, what happened? How did we become so convinced that this story was about homosexuality that we were sure we were right about it? Well, it has to do with how you cook your ham, right? How big is your pan? If your mother taught you to cut off the ends before you put it in the oven, well, darn! That must be the way to do it.

For many, many years ignorant straight people have assumed that people of other sexual orientations were sexual predators, pedophiles, rapists. For

generations and generations homosexuality has been associated in the popular imagination with the most disgusting forms of violation and humiliation. The angry mob made up of the men of Sodom looked exactly like what people thought of gay people – so much so that they didn't stop to check their assumptions.

But we know more now. We know that same gender attraction is common – perhaps as many as 10% of the population may be oriented differently. We know that there are many other sexual orientations, besides: bisexual, asexual, intersex, lesbian. We know sexual orientation is most likely a genetic condition, like the colour of your eyes, not a learned preference, like enjoying Salsa music or classical. We know that many LGBTQ people yearn to make lasting, loving relationships with one partner expressed through mutual fidelity, just as many straight people do.

In other words, our pan is bigger. We don't have to cut the ends off the ham anymore. We can read this passage differently than many generations before us have read it when they thought the angry mob was gay.

Perhaps the place for us to end this morning is with ourselves. Now that we have revealed the original meaning of this text, we can hold it up and ask what we always ask when we gather as a community of faith around the Word: what is God trying to say to us this morning in this? Where is God in this for us?

And for me it is here: when have I acted like that angry mob? When have I closed ranks to keep someone out? When have I not welcomed the stranger? When have I not extended aid to the needy? When have I made judgmental decisions? When have I not protected the vulnerable? When have I not been brave like Lot?

It is a text of judgment - but not about sexual orientation. It is a text of judgment about that part in each of us which is selfish and small and violent.

THEN THE LORD RAINED DOWN BURNING SULFUR ON SODOM AND GOMORRAH - FROM THE LORD OUT OF THE HEAVENS. THUS, GOD OVERTHREW THOSE CITIES AND THE ENTIRE PLAIN, INCLUDING ALL THOSE LIVING IN THE CITIES - AND ALSO THE VEGETATION IN THE LAND.

God will not tolerate abuse of the vulnerable. And neither should we, God's people. Amen.

(I am grateful to Jesus Metropolitan Community Church in Indianapolis and the website www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org for some ideas used here)

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at Huron Shores United Church, Grand Bend, Ontario. www.huronshoresunitedchurch.com)