

**SODOM AND GOMORRAH—REPEATED TODAY (BUT NOT HOW PEOPLE THINK)**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 20, 2019***  
***based on Genesis 19:1–16***

The sermon this morning is the second in a sermon series during which we are considering what the Bible says about human sexuality, although many of the Scriptures we consider, as we will notice this morning, have a lot to say to us beyond that subject. The series is leading up to a potentially momentous General Conference in the United Methodist Church at the end of February, when the church is reviewing its entire set of rules with regard to same-sex relationships. When people think of a Biblical story that contains homosexuality, they typically think of Sodom and Gomorrah. That story, and its perhaps surprising message, will be our focus this morning. {prayer}

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a prime example of a Biblical story of which many people have heard but few people truly understand. We all know that Sodom and Gomorrah were two ancient cities so sinful that God sent fire and brimstone in judgment upon them. The sinfulness of the cities is expressed in Genesis 18 when God declares to Abraham, “How very grave is the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah!” (Genesis 18:20) In the book of Genesis, however, it is never said what exactly the sin was. To understand the story, we need to understand first of all some of the backstory.

When Abraham journeyed to the Promised Land, he was accompanied by his nephew, Lot. At one point, they split off into separate directions. Abraham gave Lot the choice as to where he wanted to go. Lot decided to settle in Sodom; he apparently thought it was a nice town. This is our first clue that Sodom was probably not a place of continually raging debauchery, even though it is depicted that way in many retellings of the story.

At the beginning of chapter nineteen, we are told that “two angels came to Sodom in the evening.” (Genesis 19:1) Keep in mind that in the Bible, angels do not have wings. That is only in paintings. Angels in the Bible are messengers from God; and when they appear, as they do in several places in the Old Testament, they typically look just like people. In this case, they are in male form. Genesis goes on to say that “Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom.” (Genesis 19:1) This is where you hung out in ancient days if you wanted to chat with people.

At this point, it is extremely important to understand that in the ancient near east, during this time period, one of the highest moral values was the value of hospitality. In an age when people were traveling without benefit of hotels and restaurants, travelers were very dependent on finding people who would welcome them in, and offer them food or lodging or both. The righteous person would show such hospitality and would readily welcome complete strangers, providing them with food and shelter for the night. Earlier in the book of Genesis, there is a story of Abraham showing precisely such hospitality to

three angels (who again looked like ordinary people) who showed up at his tent. Abraham urged them to stop and rest; and he gave them a bountiful meal.

Once such guests came under a person's care, the truly righteous person would take responsibility for their well-being, for as long as they remained under one's roof. It is much as we treat guests today. If someone is staying at your house, you want to be sure that they have everything that they need. In ancient days, which were dangerous times, when travelers could easily be robbed or assaulted, this care for the well-being of the guest went yet further. The righteous person would defend guests against any threat, and would bar the door or take up arms against anyone who was trying to do harm to the guests. In fact, so sacred was the obligation to protect one's guests that the truly righteous person would be willing to make personal sacrifice, even perhaps sacrificing members of one's own family, for the sake of one's guests. All this will play out in the story of Lot.

As the angels approached Sodom, Genesis reports that "when Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground." He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate." (Genesis 19:1-3) Here Lot appears as the quintessentially righteous person who graciously welcomes the guests and shows them magnanimous hospitality.

But the strangers receive a somewhat different welcome from the other townsfolk. The story continues, "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; 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." (Genesis 19:4-5) This does not mean that the townspeople wanted to "get to know them." This Hebrew word translated "know" at this juncture meant "to have sexual intercourse" with them. In other words, the townspeople wanted to rape them.

When strangers come to town, the good person will receive them with gracious hospitality. When these two guys come to town, the men of Sodom want to gang rape them. You cannot get much worse than that. This of course would have been homosexual rape; but it would have been just as bad if the angels had been in female form and it had been heterosexual rape. The element of homosexuality is actually incidental to the story. The sin here was the sin of showing violent abuse rather than kindness to the stranger, and it demonstrated just how far the people of Sodom had turned from God.

The story continues and says, "Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly." (Genesis 19:6-7) There is the righteous man, barring the door, interceding to defend his guests. He apparently sensed that this initial entreaty was not working, so he continued and said, "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.” (Genesis 19:8) When people today read this story, they are often aghast and perplexed at this point, thinking, “What is he doing!?! He is offering to give his own daughters to this lecherous mob!” But keep in mind that ancient high value of hospitality—the truly righteous person would sacrifice even his own family for the sake of the guests. Lot is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice—his own children—for the sake of the strangers. Notice the foreshadowing of what happens in the New Testament when God sends His Son Jesus to offer his life for the sake of . . . us.

But the men of the city will have none of it. The story continues: But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow [Lot] 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. But the men inside [the angels] reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.” (Genesis 19:9–10) Lot is rescued by the angels he was standing to defend. The story continues with the men at the door being struck by blindness, and their efforts are foiled. Under the angels’ instruction, Lot then gathers up his family to flee the city. But they hesitate, because they think it’s really not so bad, and can’t believe that judgment is coming. So the angels literally drag them out of the city. *[But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. Genesis 19:16]* The story concludes with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a consequence of the horrendous sin of the people.

There is something of a parallel to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah that appears later in the book of Judges. A man was traveling with his concubine, that is, his slave wife, and they came just after sunset into the town of Gibeah and entered the town square *[As the sun went down, the man and his concubine turned aside to spend the night at Gibeah and sat down in the open square of the city. Judges 19:14–15]* But, the Bible reports, “No one took them in to spend the night.” (Judges 19:15) Then, the story continues, “In the evening there was an old man coming in from his work in the field . . . He said to them, ‘Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square.’ So he brought them into his house, fed their donkeys, and they washed their feet and ate and drank.” (Judges 19:16,20–21) There is the righteous person welcoming and caring for the strangers. But, the story continues, “While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, ‘Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may know him.’” (Judges 19:22) Here we go again. As in the story of Sodom, there is a homosexual element in the story, but it is incidental; the moral issue is the perverse desire of the townspeople to rape the town’s guests. It ends up in the story that the concubine is put out to the mob, and the men rape her all night until she is dead. *[They wantonly raped her and abused her all*

*through the night until morning. Judges 19:25]* This horrible crime elicits such outrage in Israel that the tribes of Israel raise an army, come against Gibeah, and burn the place to the ground. [*The whole city went up in smoke Judges 20:40*] In the end, both Sodom (along with Gomorrah) and Gibeah go up in smoke, as the towns receive judgment for sin; and the outrageous sin described in each story is the sin of violent abuse directed toward visitors. Homosexuality is not the focus of either story.

But there is an additional element in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in that God was already angered at the cities long before the incident involving attempted gang rape. The fact that the townspeople wanted to rape the visitors instead of welcoming them illustrated the depth of their moral corruption; but this does not tell us what had so outraged God about the cities in the first place. Later in the Bible, however, in the prophets, it is made very clear what exactly the sinfulness of Sodom was, which had moved the Lord to such disgust that God had decreed judgment. The prophet Ezekiel declared—“This was the sin of Sodom: she had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” [Ezekiel 16:49] Those exact same sins are associated with Sodom in the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah—pride, self-indulgence, and indifference to the needy.

So the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah *is* being repeated today—only not in the way that people think! The sin had nothing to do with same-sex relations but everything to do with self-centeredness. Many modern people have excess of food and many other things, and prosperous ease, but display little serious concern for the needs of others. Right here is a huge theme that comes out repeatedly in the Biblical prophets. The prophets talk again and again about the problem of people being focused on themselves and indifferent to the troubles of the world around them. There are many Biblical prophets; not one of them ever says anything about same-sex relations, a point to which we will return in this series, but almost every prophet challenges the self-centeredness of the day and calls people to show much greater concern for the poor and the lowly.

A further aspect of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was the issue of hospitality. Jesus referred to Sodom and Gomorrah in a major way, and it was with clear reference to hospitality. Jesus was sending his disciples out to villages all around, and he instructed them as follows: “Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting . . . but if no one will welcome you or listen to your words, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” (Matthew 10:11–15) A parallel story is found in the gospel of Luke, where Jesus says the same thing.

When Jesus used the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, it had nothing to do with homosexuality and everything to do with hospitality. Jesus saw his disciples as being in a sense like those angels in the story of Sodom; indeed the Luke story specifies that Jesus

was sending out teams in twos. [*He sent them on ahead of him in pairs . . . Luke 10:1*] Just as the two angels were bringing God's word to Sodom, so the disciples were to bring God's word to each town. But Jesus anticipated that they would not always receive a nice welcome. Indeed, in the Matthew account Jesus goes on to talk about the disciples being seriously abused.

When we think of hospitality, we tend to think of someone throwing a nice party for friends or relatives. But in the Bible hospitality is all about welcoming the stranger. As the book of Hebrews put it, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2) The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that they did not welcome the strangers but treated them with abuse. So the sin of Sodom is repeated today whenever people mistreat those who are perceived as outsiders. Throughout the world today, and in our own nation, we see lots of examples of that.

What then does this mean for our own time? If the wrath of God is poured out on a society that is self-indulgent and that does not welcome the stranger, this does not appear to bode well. But embedded in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is also a challenge and a hope. Immediately prior to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is a scene in which Abraham questions God about God's plans for Sodom. Abraham asks God, "Suppose there are fifty righteous people in the city. Will you sweep away the place and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?" (Genesis 18:24) God answers that God would spare the whole wicked city if there were only fifty righteous people in it. Then Abraham keeps lowering the number in a progression of questions, until finally he asks, "Suppose ten righteous people are found there?" God answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy the city." (Genesis 18:32) Unfortunately, there was not even that in Sodom; the only righteous people were Lot and his small immediate family.

But there is a principle laid out here—a small group of faithful people can save a much larger society from ruin. Jesus made the same point in his parable of the leaven, where a little bit of yeast leavens the whole loaf, or in his teaching where he said, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13)—about which I preached last month, when I pointed out that salt in the ancient world was used not only to enhance flavor but to prevent rotteness. A little bit of salt has a major effect. So the message for us is that even if the world around us seems full of ungodliness, we can be people who have a transforming effect. In this light, it is clear that the church is called to be precisely that sort of community that welcomes all and that shows forth real care for the poor and needy, in order that we may help our whole society move toward the goodness of God.

So misunderstood is the story of Sodom that the English word "sodomy" was invented to denote homosexual practice. In reality, the story is all about the fundamental sin that affects everyone—the hardness of the human heart that results in uncaring, abusive living. It was to bring the answer to that sin that Jesus came; and today He would

send us forth as his disciples, to be instruments of God's redeeming power and to show God's love to all.