

THE HARM IN MISREADING SCRIPTURE

Genesis 19: 1-25 selected verses; Matthew 10: 5-15, Luke 9: 51-56

How do we tell an incredible story of destruction? And how do we tell it in a way that gives it a strong moral meaning for generations to come? The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is such a story in the bible. There's the original story found in Genesis and then repeated references to it throughout the bible and in history too up to our times. For many societies around the world and for many who call themselves Christians, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is interpreted as a condemnation of same sex relationships. Have you ever heard of the sin of sodomy? It's still referred to and you can look it up in the dictionary. It's still considered a punishable crime in many societies in our world today. But is this in any way what the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about? Or has this story been totally misread because the interpretation was biased by deep prejudice and hate toward queer people?

The story itself is about the horrible consequences that happen when you commit terrible injustice. The way the disaster is described it is clearly a volcanic eruption that happened near the towns that once were Sodom and Gomorrah. The eruption totally destroys the towns leaving nothing standing or alive. Such a horrible disaster could only have been a punishment of God, no? What horrible injustice and sin must the people of Sodom and Gomorrah have committed for such a terrible disaster to have befallen them?

OK, let's begin with the story itself and then we can focus in on the meaning. The world at the time of the ancient Hebrews 3000 years ago is understood differently than at the time of Jesus 2000 years ago. There's a gap of 1000 years and a lot happens to change the world view of middle eastern people of the bible during that time. 3000 years ago there was no concept of Satan and evil in the world independent of God. Evil was simply the choice of human beings and every choice had a consequence. The world was seen as 100% under God's control. Everything that happened, and especially natural disasters, droughts or success with crops or on the battlefield, all of it was interpreted as some kind of response from God to the choices you made as a human being and a community. God was like a puppet-master pulling the strings. If you obeyed God and fulfilled God's commandments things would go well for you. If you were on the wrong side of God, you would be punished. That's what people of faith believed.

While the Hebrews lived in such a world of understanding, they also came to question it as we see in many writings of prophets, psalms, the books of Lamentations and Job to name a few examples. The world is not always fair. Evil is not always punished and good is not always rewarded. There are far too many examples of how the innocent suffer while the wicked succeed unscathed. Isn't this our world too? Do people get what they deserve? How many innocent people must be destroyed before a tyrant gets punished?

But by the time you get to the world in Jesus' day 1000 years later, most Hebrews believe the world is in crisis and that there are demonic and malignant forces at war with God and God's will for the world. There is good and evil and they're battling it out between nations and peoples and within every human heart. When Jesus is in the wilderness seeking to discern his path, when he's healing people and exorcising the demons of their minds and spirits, when he's confronting the hate in the religious and political authorities, and when he's struggling within his own spirit to rise up in love on the cross, this is a different world than the world as we find it in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah 1000 years earlier. But even though evil is alive and well and represented by Satan and his demons, Jesus still speaks of God as ultimately the victor the way love keeps rising up in the midst of fear, hate and indifference. In God's eternity evil will be banished forever and forever begins with Jesus and his resurrection beyond the cross. Yes, there's a battle between good and evil happening in the world now. But as people of faith we know how it will all end. God will be the victor and love will win in the end whenever the end comes. And this is all very important when we get to our scripture readings from the gospels.

But first, with this background, let's zero in now on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. In the chapter right before our story begins, chapter 18, you have two men who are also identified as messengers of God or angels. They visit Abraham and Sarah. When they arrive after a long journey they're welcomed, watered, fed and cared for in every way. They need to rest, sleep and get refreshed before they move on.

Abraham and Sarah are blessed for their hospitality and welcome. In the ancient world, hospitality and welcome of travelers, refugees and anyone coming through was of the highest moral value. There were no planes, trains or automobiles, nor were there air B & Bs, hotels, motels or cell phones. People travelled long distances and needed places to stay because the journey could take days, weeks, even months. Without hospitality and care for the vulnerability of making these journeys, people could never survive. Being safe from being harmed, abused, taken advantage of, even killed, was a necessity.

In the end, these messengers of God pass through as a test to see how they are welcomed as strangers. Abraham and Sarah do not know they're angels of God till later. But by treating these strangers with wonderful hospitality, welcome and grace, Abraham and Sarah are blessed.

OK, but then the story continues because these strangers who are angels tell Abraham that they're going to visit Sodom and Gomorrah because they've also heard these towns are notoriously unsafe and violent places in need of judgement for all the harm they have committed against vulnerable people. The angels will visit these towns to see if what they have heard about such sinfulness is actually true. Abraham knows about these towns and their reputation too. But he also has a nephew living there by the name of Lot. Lot is a good man

with questionable judgement. He and his family are good people. Will the angels of God spare Lot and his family if they are found to be innocent?

Well, and now we get to our story in chapter 19. The men who are secretly angels of God come to Sodom. Immediately Lot sees them and draws them into his house. He's probably worried about how they would be treated were he not there to have welcomed them first. Just like Abraham, Lot seeks to care for them and offer them the best of hospitality and care along with his household.

But then, the trouble starts. The men of the town come knocking on Lot's door. They have heard strangers have come. Do these strangers come with money and gifts? Do we take advantage of them in their vulnerability? How do powerful and violent people in our world dominate and control other people? Think about times of war? Think about what empires have done to colonize people and break their spirits so they submit? Think about human trafficking. Think about what happens in notorious prison settings. Do all the men who commit rape there also identify as queer? Absolutely not! Sexual violence has nothing to do with attraction, and certainly nothing to do with love. It's about humiliating and subjugating an enemy and breaking their spirits to control them.

The men of Sodom and Gomorrah are not gay, my friends. Hebrews who were colonized knew well how the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and later the Romans subjugated and enslaved them. Those who have known slavery know well what subjugation involves. Violence sadly and shockingly also includes sexual violence of both women and men. It has nothing to do with attraction or love. It's all about power and domination. Men, as much as women suffer such violation and humiliation in a way that breaks their spirits. It is awful, horrific and abominable.

OK, preacher, so you're saying this story has nothing to do with sexual attraction and everything to do with inhospitality and abuse of travelers and refugees who are vulnerable and in need of care and welcome. Is there any other evidence for your claim?

Yes there is. Consider our two references to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the gospels. What's the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as Jesus understands it? In our first reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus is sending out his disciples in twos (remember the two angels?). They are to go to the villages and towns of their people to spread the good news of God's love with words and healing care. They are to go with no supplies seeing how welcome they will be and whether they will receive hospitality and care as gratitude. The good news of the gospel is good news received and lived when people offer love in return.

But what happens if they are rejected and mistreated? Jesus says this: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust from your feet as you leave that house or

town." In other words, if they give you nothing, don't even take the dust with you. Shake it off. But then, Jesus also adds this: "Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town." Why? Because Jesus is sending God's healing love through his disciples to these villages and towns, hoping such love will steer the people away from the hate and fear that will ultimately lead to war and destruction if they don't change.

But what's the basis for the condemnation and punishment? Do you see anything hear about sexuality? No! It's all about hospitality and welcome of God's love or rejection of it. There are consequences to our rejection of love and our embrace of hate and abuse of all whom we see as our enemies or people we can take advantage of in their vulnerability. There are consequences. The sin here is inhospitality and a refusal to welcome God's messengers. That's the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And in case you're still not convinced, let's look at another gospel reference to Sodom and Gomorrah as we have it in our reading from Luke's gospel. In this reading, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples for the great festival of Passover. In order to go straight down south from Galilee to Jerusalem, they must pass through Samaritan territory. Jews and Samaritans are enemies. Jesus is looking for hospitality because the journey must take a few days. He and his disciples are not welcomed by the Samaritans. Immediately, James and John ask Jesus whether they should pray down fire and brimstone to fall on the Samaritan town, just like it did to Sodom and Gomorrah as a judgement. But what's Jesus' response? "Jesus turned and rebuked them." The gospel message is all about love not violent destruction. Jesus wants James, John and his disciples to rid themselves of an image of God as punisher and destroyer of sin. What will Jesus do on the cross? Pray down fire and brimstone on his enemies or offer the healing hand of forgiveness?

OK, but what's the sin here? Has it anything to do with sexuality? No! Once again and very clearly and plainly, it has to do with hospitality and welcome. We show our love by the way we treat people, and especially in how we treat those who are vulnerable and need us more than we may need them. Or, let me rephrase that. We need each other so that we practice our love and experience the blessing of love shared. The Samaritans missed their chance. Hate poisoned their hearts. The people of the villages and towns that rejected the disciples of Jesus also missed their chance. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah also missed their chance, and sadly, once the terrible destruction befell them, they were out of chances.

So what's the moral lesson for us here and now. First of all, misreading scripture doesn't just harm us. It also harms other people. There is 2000+ years of harm committed against queer people by the church. Add that to the list of harm on indigenous people and racism leading to slavery too, and so much more. It matters what kind of God we image and how we read the

bible. Any reference to sexuality or gender that oppresses queer people or women or anyone who doesn't fit the proper gender stereotypes is deeply biased, and therefore sinful.

This also means, second, that we have to read the whole bible, composed over 1000 years, with understanding that it evolved, and, that Jesus is our final standard of who God is and what is true, right and good. Jesus makes no mention of queer people except to encourage inclusion of those who are identified as eunuchs, for example, and treating women totally equal to men. Such radical thinking in his day is a big part of what got Jesus killed. By treating queer people as sinners and women as subservient to men, we have continued to crucify Jesus. Think about it. It's time to say: "no more!" and to stand up for a truthful reading of scripture. How we welcome the vulnerable stranger, refugee, or person in need is how we welcome Jesus and God. That's the message of Sodom and Gomorrah. And it's a message as relevant and true for us here and now today, as it was for people thousands of years ago. What do you think? Amen.