

Brian and I like to try new foods for the most part. So, when we were first married we were invited to dine with family at a particular ethnic restaurant. We politely ate our meals, said very little about the food, then when we all said our goodbyes...we got in our car and immediately agreed to never eat that type of food again and drove through a fast-food restaurant and filled our stomachs with familiar food. Throughout the years we have had people suggest we try this ethnic food again, and we politely decline, remembering our less than fond memory. Finally, we are here in Westerville, and some close friends recommend a specific restaurant to try. They mention what the food is like and, knowing they have not steered us wrong in the past regarding restaurant suggestions...we tried it. I have to tell you this food made no sense. All the flavor combinations were new, and yet they melded together and danced on my taste buds. It is comforting, it is unique, it is delicious. I crave this food all the time now. I moved past my memory of what was and could relish in this scrumptious food (see me after worship for this restaurant recommendation). I could see my original view was based on one single experience, in a single time, in a single place. I needed more information...and an open mind.

This passage about Martha, Jesus, and Mary was a topic of discussion among my colleagues and professors at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio a couple of weekends ago for a Thriving ministry retreat. We shared

with one another ideas and questions about how to preach this text differently- since it is such a familiar story.

We all agreed that many people feel a sense of frustration in solidarity to Martha.

I kept this story on my heart and wondered what it might mean to see the story from each perspective in the text. As I drove home from MTSO, where I had finally seen former classmates in 3d for the first time in almost 2 years. My heart was full, bursting in fact, my spirit was fed, my mind had been challenged and I learned new things.

I enjoyed theological discussions and nerded out walking through the farm, waxing and waning ecotheology...thinking about land, earth, nature, God, humankind, and being kind to all of it. I was overcome with tears on my drive home, and I wondered where these tears were coming from, I realized that I miss seminary, where I am scholar and student, and moldable and green behind the ears, and challenged, and inquisitive and curious...I love that MTSO is where I can be Mary...I can sit at the feet of Jesus and learn there...I can have my mind blown by the Holy Spirit there. I can be told new things and new ideas and sit with it there.

That was my Mary perspective. I could have an open mind, ready to receive the good news. Mary is my open mind perspective.

When I got home I immediately jumped into the laundry and the cooking and the planning, I responded to emails and got to work...

remembering that I love these tasks and challenges too (some more than others)...they are the parts of life that are necessary so that I can serve God. That was my Martha perspective...I could open doors and serve. Martha is my open-door perspective.

I was so excited to share with others about my delightful experience at MTSO, but found that when I began to talk about it...they would get distracted by the tasks at hand, they didn't actively try to ignore me, but I realized my joyful energy was not matched and I didn't have as much of an opportunity to share my good news...that was my Jesus perspective...I was excited to open my heart to others, even if they were too busy to receive it. Jesus is my open-heart perspective.

It's interesting how we have this cliché in the United Methodist Church: open minds, open doors, open hearts. This story of reception, of hospitality, and of sharing the good news...that is Mary, Martha, and Jesus.... All necessary for the making of disciples for the transformation of the world.

I challenge you even now, to consider these perspectives as we move into exploring difficult parts of scripture, that we have all heard before...and that we have all witnessed being exercised as passages to clobber LGBTQ persons. We will revisit Genesis 19: the story of Lot offering radical

hospitality to foreigners in an inhospitable town. And then we will revisit Leviticus 18 & 20: where the holiness codes called for freed slaves to be a people set apart from the culture in which they were born (Egypt) and set apart from the culture in which they were headed (the land of Canaan). God desired for them to multiply and flourish, and so the holiness codes were created.

For right now try and allow yourself the opportunity to be Mary...I invite you to sit at the feet of Jesus and receive this good news.

In Genesis 19 we read of Lot, who is Abraham's nephew. Lot is a foreigner living in Sodom...so we might see that Lot has a sensitivity towards foreigners, and he welcomes 3 travelers in his home. In the chapter previously, chapter 18, Abraham received these foreigners first. He welcomes them even bowing down before them, feeds them, and offers water to wash their feet.

In the same way, when they arrive in Sodom, Lot bows before them requests that they stay in his home and Lots offers them a feast. They even offered to stay in the town square, but Lot insisted they stay in his household. That evening all of the men of the city "both young and old" surround the house and demand that the foreign travelers be brought out so they can "know them" – some translations say, "to have sex with them" – let's be clear about what was transpiring here...this was a mob who wanted

to show dominance over and against the outsiders, the foreigners. This was not about mutual consent, this was about humiliation, dishonoring the other by stripping them of their masculinity and their humanity. This is not about love, attraction, or desire of same-gendered people. This story does not tell us anything about same sex or same gender relationships.

Keep in mind during these times there was no understanding around sexual orientation. This was not about people being attracted to one another. This spoke nothing about loving relationships.

We continue in the story...

Lot, still wanting to show the most radical hospitality, offers his young daughters instead of his visitors. We should be appalled by this, it makes me outraged. The mob doesn't take Lot up on his offer, instead they want to enact their violence on Lot. When the visitors hear what is happening they reach out and bring Lot back into the house to save him. The story concludes with God burning down the city. Generations were teaching younger generations how to dehumanize foreigners- of course God was upset by this!

Why is this story recited orally for years and years, and then written down? Author & Pastor, Colby Martin, who has studied these texts extensively (looking at the original Hebrew & Greek) alongside other ancient texts. Pastor Martin states that we should be shocked by this offer of his daughters, which is not to say that women were necessarily so

devalued, but rather to remind people how much more valuable hospitality is with regard to pious and upright living. (55)

“Other scripture refers to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as a measuring stick to describe how bad life had gotten with the Israelite people. Ezekiel talks about the sins of these cities: they were arrogant, overfed and under-concerned, they didn’t help the poor or needy, they were haughty and did detestable things.” (58) Ezek 16: 49-50

The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were that they were notoriously inhospitable. They did not live like Abraham and Lot, who offered radical hospitality to the foreigners.

Hospitality was part of holy living- and holy living is what set the Israelites apart from other communities. Specific instructions for holy living are found in the holiness codes in Leviticus.

The holiness codes are where we find our other clobber passages in the Old Testament.

Leviticus chapter 18 and chapter 20. The holiness codes (found in chapters 18-27) are about how the Israelites ought to function toward each other. These codes were meant to show a new way of living and being in the world, a way to understand God, humanity, and the relationships between them. (83)

The Israelites were freed from Egypt and moving toward Canaan...but were expected to live differently than either of those communities. They were expected to live better, live new, live differently. These codes, these laws were meant to move people toward love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

Let me read for you the two verses in Leviticus that have been used as clobber passages, and then let's consider the nuances with understanding the meaning of these verses, particularly in light of their original context...and then in our context in the 21st century.

Leviticus 18:22 states, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

Leviticus 20:13 states, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them."

Abomination is an interesting word. The original Hebrew word in this passage is "Toevah"- **toevah** was not about something being vile, gross, or detestable. It was about a violation of cultural boundaries, a taboo of the culture, not objective offences that are inherently wrong.

The sacrifices of the Hebrew people, which were virtuous, were considered a **Toevah** by the Egyptians.

There are 2 points I want you to consider here.

Point 1: **toevah** did not mean sin: Pastor Martin points out, and I quote, “if an act was identified as **toevah**, it did not therefore mean that the act in question was inherently, objectively, or eternally an immoral offense or a violation of God’s will. In other words, **toevah** was not synonymous with sinful.” End quote. (90)

Point 2: this does not seem applicable in our context. According to Martin, and I quote, “the point is that if an object or action was identified as **toevah**, then that is not, in and of itself, a sufficient reason for us in the 21st century to definitively declare that same activity, if committed today, as a sinful, immoral, objective offense.” End quote. (91)

Remember that the people of Israel were a people “set apart.” We cannot look at the list of holiness codes today and expect to see logical instructions for our way of living today. There are no holiness codes around cell phones- they didn’t exist in that time and place. This is unreasonable...they were illustrative of how Israelites were to live differently from their surrounding communities.

Toevah was not about morality, it was about identity. The word abomination is not sufficient for the Hebrew word **Toevah**.

So rather than the specifics of the text, why don't we utilize the nature of the text: We, as the children of God, are called to live differently than the world around us. A world that would choose to enact laws and divisions against people because of their identity. We need not live like that, we are called to live with radical hospitality.

Why does this text seem "clear" to people? These codes are not clear to us. They were written thousands of years ago in a different time and place and situation than ours. The ancient patriarchal world was brutal, and many of its laws were founded on assumptions about the superiority of men. (95) Gender roles during that time were about male dominance (as we learned with Lot).

Men dominated women with regard to sexuality, partially because the understanding in those ancient times was that men possessed all of the genetic material to produce human life...women were considered a womb...they only housed the offspring. So, to them, "spilling seed" was like letting go of human life. And they were told to be fruitful and multiply. If people were not procreating, they were not contributing to the population. Nothing speaks to same gender sexual orientation and relationships.

As Jay stated last week, the word homosexual was not put into the translation of the Bible until 1946...the words homosexual and heterosexual were not even known to us as orientations until 50 years ago...what makes

us think that these verses were about a concept that had never been understood in the time the text was written? There are still several discrepancies around the nouns & verbs in the Hebrew text that make these passages in Leviticus unclear as to their meaning.

“We need to stop using ancient Levitical Laws that were designed for a specific purpose and a specific people as a means for understanding who we are today.” (95-96) These passages are not clear to us.

We too are set apart

We can live into Jesus’ words: love God and love neighbor

Let us consider again the hospitality offered by each of our 3 perspectives in our gospel text today:

Martha offers an open door and prepares a table

Jesus offers his open heart and loving message

Mary offers an open mind and willingness to receive

Pastor Martin suggests and I would agree that, “the point of Genesis 19 is that the people of God are called to be people who receive the outcast and the outsiders, not create them.” (60)

What if our understanding of being the children of God today included the radical hospitality of Abraham and Lot? What if we stopped referring to that story as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and instead called it the story of Lot's radical hospitality, where all will be welcome and treated with respect and dignity...protected and cared for by the love of God.

What if we saw our call in the story?

What if the holiness codes and a burnt city were about a single story in a single time in a single space among a single set of people?

We desire more information, more clarity, and specific meaning from Biblical text. Perhaps we have read these texts for far too long as an outsider...only offering judgement from a distance...making weapons out of words.

What if we truly opened the doors, tasted the new food, and sat in the delicious confusion...we might find that there is comfort and delight in the uniqueness of the experience. And when we are well fed with the good news of God's unending love for all...we then are prepared to offer it for all.

amen

All page numbers referenced are from:

Martin, Colby. UN Clobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality. Louisville, KY; Westminster Knox Press. 2022.

