

Let Me Stop You Right There – 10.28.18

Genesis 19:1-11

Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed

19 The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.”

“No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.”

³ But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. ⁴ Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. ⁵ They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.”

⁶ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him ⁷ and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”

⁹ “Get out of our way,” they replied. “This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

¹⁰ But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. ¹¹ Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

Matthew 18:15-17

Dealing With Sin in the Church

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister ^[b] sins, ^[c] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ^[d] ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

When my brother and I moved to Lynchburg in 1975, I was in seventh grade and he was in third. It was about that time, when I was becoming a teenager and he was a big elementary kid, that he and I started to fight on something like a daily basis. We fought over the television, and over whose turn it was to sit up front. We fought dirty and hard, much to the despair of my mother. When we got to Lynchburg, though, what we found was that we had moved into a neighborhood where, for whatever reason, the kids did not welcome us. In fact, many of the kids were downright mean, calling us names, and even throwing rocks at us when we came by on bikes. During those first few years here, Dave and I got into many, many fights in that

neighborhood. Dave and I are brother and sister—it is entirely possible that, at any given moment, we might try to tear the other person apart. But despite our ability to leap into arguments between us, we forbid ANYONE else to hurt the other sibling. Dave is my brother. I can fight him, but no one else can. Our life experience has told us that this is what it means to be brother and sister—where we can, we protect each other. The story that was read to us today, that of the incident leading to the destruction of the city of Sodom, is one with which most who hang around churches long enough are familiar, but very rarely, in my experience of church, have I heard it taught in the context of hospitality. But the ancient traditions of hospitality, including those outlined in scripture, include an ethic of making sure those within the walls of your household are safe.

The story of Lot and his family reads like an ancient story of oral history—it has elements of mystery and danger, elements of divine intervention, and elements of heroic personal choice which identify the hero. Angels, disguised as men, arrive at the home of Lot in a city known for its wickedness. Lot is the one righteous man in the city that God has been looking for. Lot brings these visitors into his home, and, at that point, their safety becomes the most important thing in his life. When the men of Sodom threaten to break down the doors to get to the visitors, Lot offers them his daughters instead, preferring to let these men harm his daughters, rather than to commit the sin of not protecting those who are guests in his home. Whatever we, in the 21st century, might think of the ethic of throwing your daughters to the wolves in order to protect guests, we need first, to remember that it is story, and next, to see the power of the call hospitality as protection in this story. It is hospitality that the people of Sodom are breaking by threatening the visitors in their midst; it is hospitality that Lot is protecting by standing between the threat and the guests in his household.

You may remember, from your first (and possibly only) psychology class Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Abraham Maslow introduced his hierarchy in 1954 in his book *Motivation and Personality* which was based on years of human studies. Maslow proposed that we understand ourselves as responding to a specific set of needs, and that the way these needs work on us is hierarchical—that is, until one need is completely solved for, we will continue to be motivated by that need. After that need is met, then we move up the ladder of needs until we reach what might be called "self-actualization," or our whole self. The first and most basic needs are physiological—we need to be able to breathe, to eat, to sleep, to have water to drink and a safe place to go to the bathroom. What is the first room you look for in a new building or the house where you are a guest? The bathroom! Many of us have reached the stage in our lives when we cannot enjoy any outing where we cannot find, upon arrival, a clean, reliable bathroom. There is quite a bit of cross-over between the first stage and the next—if our physiological needs are met, then what we care about is safety. Does the bathroom door lock? How reliable is that lock? We want to be able to KEEP meeting those physiological needs—to keep eating and drinking water, to keep breathing for as long as possible.

I have only rarely in my life felt truly unsafe with any real validity. One of the most unsettling times of my life was the 17 days I spent in South Sudan, where I went in 2015 to bring supplies and support to the school built there through our friends. Not only was I further away from home than I had ever been, but I was way, way, way off the grid. I had a few days in a hotel with wifi, which was luxurious. But our transportation was deeply unreliable, and when it finally did come through, we had no way to get in touch with anyone in our families. One day, we were going out to a nearby village to talk about the school we had started and the possibility of the children of that village going to the new school. We drove through the village where we had been staying, having been offered generous hospitality by the local governor who gave us his tent and his beds for the week we were there and provided us protection and transportation. We drove down a road for a while until we got to the edge of the village where, to my chagrin, the road stopped and the truck did not. We continued to drive for about 45 minutes through fields, stopping every once in a while to pick up someone who was walking and add them to the crew in the back of the truck. As we drove further and further away from the little village, I began to realize that except for the people with me at that moment, no one in the world knew where I was, nor would they have any way to find me. There was no water, except what we brought for ourselves; no food except the protein bars in my pack. There were several young men with us carrying AK 47's which did not increase my sense of safety or security—the need for the presence of automatic weapons was the fact that this little country was so often at war and that there, in the northern part of the country, incursions from Sudan happened often.

When we arrived at the village, which is called Aliap, we were welcomed as honored guests. We had a wonderful meeting with the villagers, many of whom were women. None of them spoke English, so I showed them pictures of my children on my phone and they pointed to their children in the crowd. After the meeting, they had a ceremony which included drums and dancing. They had a cow tied down when we arrived, cows being the most valuable property in South Sudan. As I had feared, the cow was the sacrifice offered in thanksgiving for the possibility of a school for their children. After the cow's neck was sliced, its blood pouring onto the ground as an offering, the governor and my fellow travelers and I were invited to step over the cow's body, possibly to signify our agreement in the deal—I was never sure what that actually meant. And then we went back to the village. I offered up protein bars in the truck on the way back—the governor made fun of me a bit, saying that Americans always have to be eating something.

Two things I would like to point out about that experience—one was the extraordinary hospitality of the governor and the people of the village. People with little or nothing, who were willing to share what they had with a bunch of overprivileged Americans. Second was my abject fear. I was terrified, pretty much the whole time I was in South Sudan. I was never so happy to see an airport in my whole life as when I landed at Dulles on the return journey. Systems in South Sudan barely exist, and where they do, they do not work well. At one point, our journey had been delayed so often and our stay extended by so many days, that I despaired

of ever getting out of that very difficult country. I mentioned that bathrooms are on the list of the first basic need: let's just say that to call what is available in South Sudan a "bathroom" is quite a stretch. I never felt safe there. I wore the wrong clothes, I did not know the social rules, I did not know where to turn if things went bad and I was, decidedly, foreign to the people there. What I did come to understand, for the first time, was some sense of what it must have been like for my South Sudanese friends to navigate their way in America. What we think of as our comforts and luxuries—like heating and air conditioning, good public transportation, fast food—for them was yet another alien thing they had to learn—something else that was not in their life experience that threw them off kilter and out of homeostasis. They hated the fact that everything tasted sweet, they did not know how to get anywhere outside their own neighborhood, and the immensity of the choices offered to them every day in every sphere of life was overwhelming, to say the least. I can imagine that my South Sudanese friends spent their first few years here, especially during the time before they could ever return home, in something like the state of terror I felt in South Sudan.

Here is the upshot of all of this for us, as we look at what it might mean to offer protection as an element of hospitality: fear is perceived, not necessarily actual. My South Sudanese friends were terrified there in the comfortable city of Charlotte—easily as scared as I was in South Sudan, where they, as native sons and daughters, travel regularly without fear. In Charlotte, amidst all that wealth, they felt lonely and hungry and scared and out of place. What we need to learn is that if we want to offer the hospitality of a safe place to people, we have to recognize that their fears are not necessarily our fears—we have to be prepared to offer safety broadly, in ways that others, who are not insiders, can recognize.

It may be surprising to think of church as a place where people need protection, as a place where harm can come to people. Many of us who are here were raised to church—it is part of our homeostasis—our ability to stay in balance. Church is that way for me. I love church. I was born to it. Before I was even born, I heard its voices, experienced its rhythms, felt the touch of its people. Before I could even focus my eyes, I was passed from hand to hand, coddled and loved by young and old, so that church, for me, is a safe, and welcoming place. Now, because I am a student of church, and have lived in it all my life, I also see church as it really is—not some Pollyanna vision of "peaceful community," but a collection of real people, acting like good brothers and sisters, loving each other, protecting each other, making each other crazy and each doing that one thing that irritates their siblings every single time they do it. Church is full of all of the things the rest of society deals with: from friendship to bullying, from honesty and integrity to deception and cheating—it's all just as present in church as it is anywhere else. And if a person is not born to church, it can be terrifying. What does all that stuff mean? Why do they say those things, sing those songs, eat that bread, drink—God help them—grape juice? Not to mention those who have been actively harmed by church—those rejected for who they are racially, or how they identify in gender or sexual orientation, or how much money they

have, or how good their social skills are. Church is a system of insiders, and can be terrifying to anyone who is not in the system.

Even for insiders, churches can be a minefield. I have, in my life in church, witnessed everything in church from mean girls—even among the 80 year-old set of girls—to bullying, and abuse. I have been in churches where the atmosphere, even on Sunday morning, was mean-spirited and toxic, and I have been in churches whose grief and damage was palpable every time they were together. To call ourselves brothers and sisters is to invoke something very human. But here is the thing to remember from scripture: we are not to give in to fear. Fear is one of the things, along with judging our fellow human beings, that we are absolutely forbidden. And so we are called to stand at the door, like Lot. Whatever we value most, its value pales in comparison with the call to protect those given to us in our space. Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Matthew 18 were to confront anyone with whom they had a problem, face to face. If that didn't work, they were to go get a friend, and bring that friend back with them to again confront the person face to face. Confront. Face to face. Guarding the door against rumor, guarding the door against gossip, guarding the door against harming a brother or sister by believing the worst of them without even asking them what they meant, or whether they realized that their actions were problematic.

It's unlikely that any of us will have to actually bar the door to protect those in our space from harm. Although I have to say, we are living in a time when that is more likely than it used to be. What is far most likely—what is actually probable—is that we will run up against the rumor mill, that we will be in a room where someone wants to tell us how one of our brothers and sisters is the problem, how wrong he is, how badly she behaves. What is far more likely is that we will feel left out, or subverted by some powerful force at work on the system. This past week in Bible study, we ran across the Greek word which is always translated “brothers and sisters” in English—it is *adelphois*. It is one word, without gender, which means “siblings,” “brothers and sisters.” To me, the fact that it is one word suggests unity, it suggests that when we come together in this space, when we cross that threshold to be one people, we take on a different status, one which requires us not only to care for, but to protect each other. Let me suggest that, having accepted our status as siblings, we also accept our responsibility to keep each other safe. Let me suggest that we begin to practice saying this line: “Let me stop you right there.” Let me recommend that we recognize, that we allow ourselves to believe, deeply, that we will DEFINITELY have issues with each other, at the same time that we pledge never to let anyone else talk about OUR sibling with anything but words of praise. Let me suggest that we absorb the teachings of scripture and embrace the idea that we will need to confront each other, face to face—that this is part of what it means to love each other. That part of protecting each other is being honest about our issues, being straight-forward about our feelings and barring the door against whisper campaigns and rumors.

Just about everyone in this room, except our youngest members, grew up during the apex of the Christian church in America. When we were children, Christian culture was the culture, although in a more general, we-don't-talk-about-it-but-everybody-knows-it kind of way. We are not there anymore. And part of the reason we are not there anymore is that the church has not been safe. It has not been broadly hospitable, it has neither protected outsiders coming in, nor has it paid attention to protecting the most vulnerable people in its own systems. If we are to have a vibrant community, if we would be *adelphois* and provide, for each other, the face of God in the midst of a chaotic world, we will not be able to ignore the call to protection. These doors are our doors, those thresholds are ours to protect. There is plenty on the outside for each of us to face without feeling unsafe within these walls. We are Lot, having invited something of absolute divinity, something absolutely sacred, into our space, something which lives in the face of each person here, in the divine spark behind every set of eyes. We are the keepers of those doors. And we will do so. We will not let anyone of our brothers and sisters be harmed. We will speak honestly to and about each other. We will care for each other in our vulnerable places, and we will hold each other up, both offering and receiving the hospitality of this place. And when our fears attack us, when we feel afraid or out of place, we will remember that

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow
Of the Almighty.

(We) will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

Amen.