

A Defense of Sodom
Genesis 18:20 – 32.
Sunday, July 24, 2022

(I have reached the conclusion that progressive pastors need to speak with boldness about subjects we tend to take for granted. Our voices need to be added to those that are so determined to undo the gains we have made in human rights. This sermon is an artifact of that conclusion. Plain speech for a time of deep division and confusion.)

I am not a lawyer, but I intend to play one in this sermon. Maybe I have been watching too many episodes of the British drama, *SILK*. But I am going to be the defense attorney for the city of Sodom. And you are the jury.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, what the Bible shows us is not a God who bullies people, punishes people, but a God who gets his way by patiently struggling to make himself clear to us, to make God's love real to us, especially when we don't seem to care, or want to avoid God. And the Bible does this by telling stories from the human point of view, as if God needed to be persuaded to be faithful to his people. Abraham argues with God because things are going badly in Sodom, and it seems God will give up and blast people into oblivion. The story shows us that Abraham argues with God until he has persuaded him to be merciful. (Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*).

The writers of Genesis didn't believe in a capricious, bad-tempered God who needed to be calmed down by sensible people. They show Abraham appealing to the deepest and most true thing about God as he prays to him. Abraham is arguing with God about what seems to be God's plan to destroy the wicked city of Sodom. Surely, says Abraham, there must be some good people in Sodom. And if there are, "the judge of all the earth" must be fair to them; he can't destroy the good with the bad: "far be it from you to do that" says Abraham. And God allows the argument to proceed, gradually reducing the number of good people there would need to be in the city for God to spare it. It is a story about a man who is discovering that God really is to be trusted to do right.

Now, the prosecution is going to tell you that God wiped out Sodom because it was a city full of homosexuals. When people are scared, they turn to hyperbole to scare other people. Preachers will shout that the city is overrun with homosexuals. They claimed that gay marriage would increase the number of divorces. When people are scared, when they are making up stuff, they will invent hordes at the gates. They will cry about the locusts coming to destroy the land. Here they claim that Sodom is a city of homosexuals. But that can't be true. There were men, women, and children in Sodom – a bunch of people. God doesn't destroy cities because 8% of the population is gay. Sure, there are plenty of preachers testifying for the prosecution, but they are not telling the truth.

If God destroyed cities for being wicked, what city would still be in existence? Don't you think God's patience would have long run out with Washington, D. C., for example? Or what about Las Vegas. "Sin city." "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." But God has not destroyed any

cities. This story is not sufficient evidence to suggest otherwise. Now, I can testify there are more than 10 good people in Vegas. I did a workshop for a large Evangelical Lutheran Church in Vegas, and I met a lot of good people, good, solid Lutherans. Maybe the Lutherans are keeping Vegas from destruction. I am, of course being facetious. God doesn't wipe out cities. The story is about how we humans would act. We would get angry and if we had the power, we would wipe out cities, wouldn't we? Some Americans are so angry today, that if they had the power, they might destroy democracy.

Let's take a moment and look carefully at the story and see if there is homosexual activity taking place. The prosecution's case rests entirely on one phrase: "that we may know them." The English translation here is rather puritan. It is an attempt not to use slang or curse words. This is typical male braggadocio. This is how men talk in bars. Now, bar talk, as far as I know, is not a criminal offense. Men have a tendency to boast and threaten. The men of Sodom are mouthing off, showing out, but they are not doing anything. The men of Sodom were bullies, and people tire of bullies sooner or later. Big-mouth, show-off bullies. They want to exert their power over the two angels. And one way they did this in ancient times was through the rape of men they captured or took prisoner. This is heterosexual rage and power. This is lording it over men who were now deemed to be weaker. Such men carry out the same act in symbolic ways today by oppressing gays, preaching against gays, and denying gays human rights. And they are gathering their forces now for an attempt to undo gay marriage through the Supreme Court. What happens here seems like an equivalent of a male spitting contest. Testosterone and ignorance mixed in a toxic brew. The men demand that the two angels be handed over to them. Lot refuses and then offers to turn over his virgin daughters to the mob. Nothing happens. Nobody has any kind of sex. There's no rape.

The only action in this story is when the two angels struck all the men of Sodom with blindness. The men of Sodom didn't know who they were messing with did they? Struck them with blindness? One year, in California, a fundamentalist Christian school was in the NCAA regional tournament final and the founding pastor of the school, a huge basketball fan, was in attendance. His team was up by 1 and the other team was at the free throw line for 2 shots. If they made both free throws the Christian college lost. The preacher, carried away in the moment, shouted out, "Lord, strike him with temporary blindness." That's the kind of power that some preachers wish they had.

I would call the jury's attention to a brief passage in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel: "This was the guilt of Sodom: she had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy." Sodom refused to show hospitality. The men of Sodom, should have received the two angels as special guests and provided them with food, drink, and shelter. Instead, they formed a mob and tried to rape them. Lack of hospitality is the source of Sodom's evil. A city is not destroyed for being unfriendly. After all, being unfriendly is a calling for New York restaurant waiters. The abuse is expected for the sake of fine cuisine.

Lot, on the other hand, takes hospitality to the excess. He offers up his own daughters to protect the two men of God because the law of hospitality was sacred. This really bothers me, because I can't imagine a father turning his daughters over to a mob. Thank God it didn't happen. But then again, we worship a God who gave his son over to crucifixion.

Do you see how messed up this story has become in the hands of small-minded, judgmental preachers who are out to spread hatred everywhere? This is not about God's wrath; it is about the lack of hospitality that exists in our world.

A pastor friend of mine posted on his Facebook page:

I am a Christian pastor.

I will officiate same-gender weddings.

I will officiate interracial weddings

I will officiate non-binary weddings.

I will officiate interfaith weddings

I'll officiate the weddings of any adults who wish to profess lifetime devotion to one another, because we need more love in the world. If the sacraments are truly gifts of God's grace, then my friend is right about all of this. I stand with him. There needs to be more love in this world. Always stand up to bullies, especially the moralistic ones.

I tell you that this story has never been about homosexuality and always about hospitality. It would be wrong of you to judge the city of Sodom on the charge of homosexual activity. In addition, this story is about Abraham and intercession. The word is a big word in Christian faith, among people who still believe in prayer. Intercession. Hard bargaining. A fierce argument. A matter of life and death. If enough holy people get together and start praying about something with enough passion and determination, there's no telling what might happen. Those prayers might make possible a crack in the door where God might be able to accomplish something previously though impossible.

Forget about all this fussing about sex. "Fussing about sex" is a bigger problem than sex. Fussing about sex is like fussing about the sands on the seashore. Look at Abraham down on his knees pleading for the safety of Sodom. Abraham argues with God – a defense attorney at the bar of justice, pleading for a city.

Abraham wants to save Sodom. It is a deep feeling that comes over us when we are determined to save a city, a church, a member of our own family. I need some of you to be Abraham pleading for our church. We are not on God's hit list, but we are not prospering and thriving, are we? We need people to plead with God for our future.

This is the part of the story that I love. What a liberating scene. One man arguing with God for the life of a city. I have almost nothing in common with the people who want God's wrath to fall on cities. I can't tell you how much utter disgust I had when Pat Robertson said that God caused Katrina to destroy New Orleans because of gays and because the city was wicked. That is my city. I went to seminary in that city. That are thousands of good people in New Orleans. It's the most interesting city in the nation. God would not destroy all that spice, all that culture, and certainly would not destroy Jazz. And besides this is the city where the saints go marching in. I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.

Sadly, some Christians like the idea of God's wrath. Pat Robertson was not alone in his judgment. People who like the story of Sodom's destruction are like people standing outside the

state prison when a convicted murderer is being executed. Will Campbell relates a story of attending a vigil outside a Florida prison where a single one of God's children was about to die inside the prison. A group of young men and women nearby cheered lustily as the electrocution happened. "That's it! That's Old Sparky!" I heard as the lights in the prison walls blinked from a power surge. "Fry the bastard! Bring on the barbeque sauce!" Their callous chant was sickening. The celebration of death was nauseating.

The evangelicals in our midst never pay much attention to Abraham's intercession. They go right to the destruction of Sodom. Robert Bork wrote a book, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*, with the theme that America was becoming Sodom and on the brink of destruction. James Dobson says he is convinced that American is sliding toward Sodom. He says that we are headed in the direction of the depravity of Sodom. Billy Graham said, "Even though America is just as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah ever were, and as deserving of the judgment of God, God would spare us if we were earnestly praying, with hearts that have been cleansed and washed by the blood of Christ." Robert Jeffress, senior pastor FBC Dallas says that God destroyed Sodom with fire and brimstone from heaven. Jeffress says, "We cannot condone what God has condemned."

What is it in the Christian mind that embraces all this destruction? Ken Ham, at the Creation Museum, claims that God caused a world-wide flood that killed more than 4 billion people. He seems to exult in this act of divine genocide. He routinely belittles scholars who point out that the story of Noah and the ark is metaphorical and at most only points to a devastating flood in the general area. But people like to think about the flood as God's destroying wrath. I wonder why we always think that we would have been on the ark with Noah. According to the story, there was only one righteous man left on earth and God saved that one man and his family. If there was only one righteous person left on earth, do you suppose that you are that one? How can we live with this story and be told in Sunday school that a man had a 100 sheep, one was lost, and he went in search of the one? How can we be taught that every human being is precious in God's sight and then turn into people chanting for the death of a prisoner, shouting for people to be locked up, demanding that justice be done. Cruel, inhumane. Or as Will once said in a debate about capitol punishment. "It's tacky."

I am always nervous around people who think it is their job to make sure that everybody who has it coming, gets it. The people who rant about Sodom and celebrate Sodom's destruction are not good people. I avoid them whenever possible, even though they hang out in churches. I want to be with people of hospitality and mercy, people of intercession and deep love, good people like you. I submit to you that there is only one right decision in this case. When you look at the evidence, you will conclude there is not only reasonable doubt, but also the truth that leads to one verdict and one verdict alone: Not guilty.