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Summary: *The story of Lot as he seeks (however clumsily) to offer lodging and protection to the divine guests who show up at his door in Sodom, reminds us that God has always been about hospitality and expects us to be too.*

THE COST OF HOSPITALITY

As a young mom and a young minister, I loved the “grown-up” status that my first baby conferred upon my ministry. Having my daughter granted me membership in an exclusive club – the *real* adults! – and I loved the way my church loved her. She was one of those true #churchbabies, passed from one set of adoring arms to another every Sunday before and after worship.

But when she was about eighteen months old, my sunny, smiling girl seemed suddenly to dread the Sunday pass-the-baby routine. It was a little late in her development for the clingy phase and I was not the kind of mom who was going to raise a shy, receding girl. Plus, my church expected to share hugs and kisses with her. They *needed* her. So I pressed her into the embrace of the adults at church I knew she loved. And she cried. I can still see the expression of distress on her toddler face well over a decade later. I would apologize to our friends and wonder to myself what had happened to make her so skittish.

About a year later, when the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) came, I instantly comprehended my daughter’s discomfort with close contact with lots of people, rapid transitions galore, and intense expressions of emotion. She had been telling me she did not want that, that indeed it was painful for her; and I had not listened. I had sacrificed the well-being of my child for the sake of another commitment, and to keep from losing face with my church members. Is it now years later, and as a maturing teenager, she has received my apology with grace.

When I read the story of Lot in Gen 19 about the father who offers his own children to keep a commitment to the strangers he has welcomed into his home, I am embarrassed to say I can sympathize. We do not always have our priorities straight; we do not always consider the effect that our attempts to maintain niceties in one arena may have on the beloveds in our closest circle of obligation. But as my daughter says to me now, I can say to our brother Lot: “It seems to me you were doing your best.”

A PRIMITIVE STORY

We read the Bible, always, searching out clues to the nature and character of God. The Bible is, first, a story about God. Gen 19 is one of the earliest stories about the creator of the universe who, after the strange and disappointing encounters of Gen 3–11, re-engages

humanity first through the person of Abraham, and by extension through Abraham’s family members.

The targeting of the twin cities Sodom and Gomorrah for destruction based on the “great outcry” regarding their “very grave sin” (Gen 18:20), all the way through the stylized smiting by “fire and brimstone” (Gen 19:24, KJV), seems similar in kind to the stories of Noah and the Great Flood, or the Tower of Babel. In stories like these God seems to be less an omnipotent sovereign and more a frustrated explorer of the world God has made and loves, seeking to know whether its inhabitants are worthy to inhabit that world.

The Sodom and Gomorrah story takes the form of an ancient judicial proceeding, in which an investigation is made (“I must go down and see . . .” Gen 18:21); and sentence and verdict are rendered together (“we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord,” (Gen 19:13). God is presented as a moralistic calculator in which human evil will be permanently and decisively punished in an attempt to cleanse the earth of its influence, and human righteousness will be rewarded and rescued for the sake of its perpetuation. There is no complexity in the moral calculus, and no thought for the possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

This, of course, is not the fullness of God that we eventually come to know through the Bible’s unfolding drama of God’s engagement with humanity. The story presents a primitive, incomplete understanding of God. But in Abraham’s bargaining conversation with God prior to Gen 19, in which Abraham asks God to consider whether the righteousness of a few might be salvific for the many (Gen 18:22-33), we see a dawning understanding that someday the righteousness of “the one man” will be salvific for the whole of humanity (Rom 5:15-21). The story in Gen 19:1-29 is therefore an important early step in the sequence of our understanding of God’s mercy for the people God loves.¹

And here, too, we catch a glimpse of God’s everlasting priorities: what are the identifiers of righteousness, what are the qualities of the people God saves? God’s agents in Sodom are not looking for heroic sacrifice or ethical perfection. It turns out all they want is a good meal and a place to rest their bones. They have been sent to seek *hospitality*; where they find it, they will find people who are worthy of God’s saving hand.

THE CENTRALITY OF HOSPITALITY

Imagine it: God and Abraham, just getting to know each other in those early days of Gen 12-25, with God’s character revealed over the course

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of generations to Abraham's descendants. When they think back on the earliest days of their special relationship, they remember this about God: God always did enjoy a fine meal. God was, from the very first, all about the hospitality.

The dual stories of Gen 18 and 19 invite us to compare Abraham's hospitality with his nephew Lot's. So Abraham "ran" to meet the strangers that approached his tent (Gen 18:2); Lot simply "rose" as they approached his city gate (Gen 19:1). Abraham prepared a feast with fatted calf and cakes from "choice flour" (Gen 18:6-7); Lot's feast made do with "unleavened bread" (Gen 19:3). Abraham stood in service of his guests while they ate (Gen 18:8); Lot sat down at table with them "and they ate" (Gen 19:3). Perhaps we are already invited to imagine that Lot is not quite as good at this as his uncle Abraham. Yet he will be rescued at story's end for God seems to honor the intention rather than the execution. More of Abraham's story will be covered in Lesson 6 of this issue of *Just Women*.

It is important to acknowledge that hospitality to strangers was not God's idea, nor Lot's, nor Abraham's. Rather, the ancient Near Eastern culture in which these men lived was one in which hospitality flourished (or not) as an important indicator of political and economic relationships between individuals and peoples. Traveling strangers approached individuals (like Abraham) and cities (like Sodom) for one of two reasons: to conquer and plunder, or to seek temporary aid for their journey. Those who were approached had to guess at the travelers' intentions, and offer a response. A preemptive offer of hospitality might diffuse the nefarious intentions of bandits. A protective withholding of hospitality might insult the most innocent of passersby.

The offer of a night's shelter, additionally, was about more than the promise of a dry, warm bed. The host promised, by his offer, the protection of his house for the stranger. A temporary alliance was assumed by all; the host was responsible for the safety of the guest. To fail in this aspect of hospitality would be to fail in the entire project.

Victor Hugo made use of this idea in his novel *Les Miserables*, in which an escaped convict comes to a church for sanctuary and safety. The priest who presides over the parish offers Jean Valjean a meal and a bed, but Valjean, scarred by years in prison, cannot trust such kindness. He steals the church's silver in the night and absconds, only to be arrested in the morning and brought back to the church with the stolen valuables. The priest, a model of the hospitality

we are examining in Gen 19, tells the police that Valjean has not stolen the goods; they were a gift. Furthermore, he places a pair of sterling candlesticks in the thief's bag, saying, "You must have forgotten these." Besides the meal and the bed, the priest also offers Valjean the protection of his house (God's house) from the system that would imprison him again. Irrational? Yes. But necessary according to an ethic of hospitality that says the protection of one's guests is one's highest responsibility.

HOSPITALITY TO THOSE IN NEED

We have noted that Lot's hospitality does not shine in comparison to Abraham's, but in comparison to his Sodom neighbors, Lot is a superb host. This is not the first time they have revealed their fearful and stingy disdain for strangers. God has heard "a great outcry" (Gen 18:20, 19:13) from those who have sojourned through Sodom and Gomorrah before. They have made their cities truly inhospitable to those in need.

My family has lived in a variety of cities in a variety of American contexts: the old South of Birmingham, Alabama; the new South of Atlanta; the sprawling suburbs of Long Island; and now the giant metroplex of Dallas-Fort Worth. We have ministered to (and alongside) many who are poor, and have noticed that it is easier, or harder, to be poor in certain American locations. For example, some towns have abundant public transportation, easily accessible city services, good working relationships between government and non-profit groups, and a network of faith communities working together to serve the least of their citizens.

Other towns and cities are distinctly inhospitable, with city councils that zone and regulate the poor right out of their city limits. For example, the town in which I live now disallows the construction of apartment buildings and other low-income housing so that low-wage workers have little or no chance to live in the town that depends on their labor to keep its infrastructure humming. A couple of years ago, the governor of Texas named about a dozen cities in our state that he felt were "too soft" on "illegal immigrants." In an attempt to shame these cities, including the one in which I was serving a church with an English as a Second Language (ESL) program for our immigrant neighbors, he called them "sanctuary cities." We were pleased to receive the designation as a place of safety for any who would come asking for hospitality.

Indeed, Sodom and Gomorrah were long remembered by Israel's prophets for having made their cities inhospitable to those most in need. Isaiah called them to memory in his opening poem: "Hear the

word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" (Isa 1:10)

And when the charges of their crimes against humanity are named, both for the literal Sodom and Gomorrah of history and the metaphorical Sodom and Gomorrah of Isaiah's contemporary Israel, God judges them for their neglect of those in need.

The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves. . . . The LORD rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts.

Isa 3:9, 13-15

Even more explicitly, the prophet Ezekiel called on his hearers to remember the twin cities' sin of inhospitality.

As I live, says the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.

Ezek 16:48-50

Indeed, Jesus calls to mind the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah's inhospitality when he sends his disciples out to seek welcome in the towns and villages of Galilee, in Matt 10:15, which will be addressed in Lesson 4 of this *Just Women* Bible study. In sum, the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah were remembered for centuries for being the kind of protectionist, fearful people who withheld hospitality from needy strangers. Woe to them, indeed.

THAT HORRIBLE NIGHT

Thus, with a thorough understanding of the requirements of ancient hospitality, and God's own prioritization of hospitality as an ethic for God's people, we arrive at the events of that horrible night depicted in Gen 19:1-29. Lot's neighbors, the townspeople of Sodom, react to the news of strangers in their midst with fear and loathing. They rush Lot's house with the intention of asserting their power and running the strangers out of town.

Threatening to sexually assault the strangers in Lot's care would be a barbarically effective way to signal the extreme unwelcome they intended; then as now, rape is often employed as an act of war, leaving victims to serve as warnings to others who would stand in opposition to the perpetrators' power. What more effective way to spread the word that "We have all the power here, and we are sharing nothing; woe to the ones who come asking!"? Better to assault than kill your victims, which would silence them forever; rape is an act of domination that kills the human spirit but leaves a living legacy of terror and shame.

It surely goes without saying that the same-sex nature of the threat at Lot's door that night had nothing to do with our contemporary understanding of homosexual orientation and the loving mutuality of relationships between gay or lesbian persons. The "orientation" of Lot's neighbors was toward terrorism. That Lot could offer his daughters as potential substitutes for their violent intentions (a serious problem we will address shortly) is another clue that the mob is not "gay" – it is savage, and its savagery can be acted out without respect to sexual orientation.

In response to the threat at his door, Abraham's hapless nephew Lot clumsily runs through his options. He cannot physically overpower the mob, but he has promised sanctuary to his guests by inviting them home; he risks shame and perhaps violence from his disrespected guests, if he reneges. He will have to bargain and plead, and so he appeals to the hospitality ethic he hopes they all agree upon: ". . .do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Gen 19:8b). To further convince them to accept the deal, and hoping that the mob on his porch is just a little overexcited, rather than murderous, he offers his daughters for their sport.

Now, my feminist friends, we have a tricky task. We must remember – while also wholeheartedly rejecting – the assumption in ancient Near Eastern culture that

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.

~Henri J. Nouwen (1932-1996), Dutch Catholic priest, theologian

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Lot's daughters were his property to use, trade, or discard as he pleased. It was true, but it should not have been. We are remembering the context in which he lived – not excusing his behavior. We deserve to be outraged by his callousness, sickened by his actions that night, and strengthened in our resolve to elevate the status of girls and women everywhere around the world, including places where they are still traded, bought, and sold as property of the men who own them. The metroplex in which I live is one of the world's busiest sex-trafficking hubs *right now*. The patriarchal sin of Lot is still with us, and it is still ruining the lives of countless girls and women whose bodies and very selves are valued as less-than-fully-human.

At the same time, we may find a shred of sympathy for Lot if we remember, as I did in the opening paragraphs of this lesson, the times that we have sacrificed (on a very small scale, comparatively speaking) our children's welfare for the sake of some other commitment. The reality of life is that our multiple commitments to kindness, generosity, and hospitality sometimes compete with one another. We "shush" our spouses to keep peace at an extended family gathering. We neglect dinner at home to help a colleague finish a project. As Lot and we often discover, hospitality pulls at our loyalties, introducing unforeseen complications into our lives and the lives of those we love. I have often offered my home as a place of respite for a weary student, a place of celebration for a church in need of a party, or a place of comfort for a sorrowing neighbor, only to realize too late that my family is paying a price for my hospitable impulses. It takes a discerning heart to determine when one's door (and one's heart) can be opened without risking your beloveds feeling that they have been shut out.

The text presents one more clue about Lot's desperation to protect his guests. His violent neighbors reject his horrible attempt at negotiation by threatening, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them" (Gen 19:9b). And so our narrator prompts us to remember: *Lot was a stranger, too*. He had taken up residence in Sodom, but as they say in small towns across the U.S., "He's not from around these parts." Abraham and his extended family, including Lot, had been called away from their homeland to sojourn as strangers for the rest of their lives. Following the call of God meant that they would never feel at home again. Lot had tried, in Sodom, but still they rejected him. In offering hospitality to the strangers who approached the city gate that day, Lot did what God would implore the Israelites to do hundreds of years later: "You shall also love the stranger," God said through God's

prophet Moses; "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19). We know how to treat others because we remember our own similar circumstances a long time ago.

Lot was not an exemplar of perfect hospitality. We should not aim to emulate his methods. But the Bible is a story about God, and here we learn that God has placed a high priority on the ethic of hospitality. Even when clumsily executed at the expense of his family, Lot's impulse to welcome the strangers into his home was enough for God to ensure his rescue and guarantee his future.

REMEMBERING TO PAY IT FORWARD

I remember when my spouse and I were super-young and super-broke. We never left town because we had no money to spend on anything after rent, utilities, and groceries. A family in our church noticed that we never took a vacation, and invited us to join them on a trip to the grandparents' farm in Tennessee. There was nothing special planned; just Grandmother's home cooking and Granddad's invitations to help feed the chickens. Oh, and a springy old bed with a down comforter upstairs in the house's loft, and scenic walks around the fence line of the farm's pastures. More than twenty years later, we both remember that weekend with such relish. We ate and slept, walked a little, and ate and slept some more. We returned home rested and refreshed and recommitted to the good work to which God had called us.

A few times in the last few months, we have hosted young musicians in our home. They travel the countryside with their little families – spouses, babies – making music just about anywhere they can get a hearing. There's little money in it, but they are contributing such beauty to a world sorely in need of it. We have a firm guest bed, and offer basic home cooking and clean towels. The most recent troubadours said they were going back to Tulsa – back to their regular jobs and their regular routine – feeling restored. They had slept well in our guest room, without worry or responsibility. They thanked us, but they should have been thanking the Tennessee farmers who welcomed us all those years ago. We remember that we too, were sojourners, and so. . .

NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Gen: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 170-173.