

All Saints Episcopal Church  
By the Rev. Justin R. Cannon  
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The *Real* Sin of Sodom

“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

Today I want to preach about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah! You heard me right—and if you’re a newcomer bear with me two minutes before you decide to walk out. You see, in our political sphere there’s a lot of discord, and every time I turn on the news there are people, Christian people, proudly flaunting their sin—particularly the Sin of Sodom—and this is distressing to me as a pastor. I’m serious. This Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is as real and rampant today as it was thousands of years ago.

If you’ve ever wanted a concise biblical definition of what the Sin of Sodom is, all you need to do is turn to the book of Ezekiel, chapter 16, verses 49-50. The prophet Ezekiel writes, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.” This sin of greed, arrogance, and unconcern for the needy is an abomination before the Lord. In fact, Jesus himself addresses this deplorable sin in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 10, verses 14-15. When he sends out the disciples, he says to them of their travels, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town.” The abomination of hospitality to the stranger, the traveler, and foreigner—this is the Sin of Sodom.

In fact, that’s what happened in the book of Genesis when God sent angels to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah to declare his judgment. The people of the town rose up to assault the angels and Lot offers his daughters instead, protecting his oath of hospitality to the visitors. In Genesis 19 he says to the crowd, “Don’t do anything to these men, because they have come under the protection of my roof.” He gives the reason for offering his daughters instead—these angels have come under the protection of his roof. Hospitality was a sacred institution in that day and age.

It makes sense in today’s Old Testament lesson then, why in his address to Sodom and Gomorrah the prophet Isaiah exclaims, “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” and he continues, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Let’s shift a moment now to take a glimpse at today’s Gospel, to explore why it was paired with this Old Testament lesson.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells a story involving money. You know, Jesus actually has a lot to say about money. In fact, he talked about money more often than he did Heaven and Hell. He

actually talked about money more often than anything other single topic except the Kingdom of Heaven. More than a third of his parables have something to do with money: the rich fool, the widow's mite, the parable of the talents, the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance, the lost coin, and the list goes on. This doesn't include his turning over the moneychanger's tables in the temple and his command to the rich man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. I don't think I need to cite anymore to convince you that Jesus had a few things to say about money.

But why money? Jesus is in the business of salvation—eternal salvation. Money seems to ephemeral, so worldly. We usually hear about Jesus' teachings on love, the poor, inclusion...why was he so concerned about money. We come into the world with nothing and leave with nothing. Come on Jesus, don't you have anything better to talk about? Money is personal. Talking about money makes people uncomfortable.

In truth, I think Jesus spoke about money not because of anything in particular about money itself, but because of the power attached to money, the values that are reflected by how people use money, and most importantly what's reflected in how we relate to money about what's going on internally: our fears, our trust, our honesty, our values. These all surface in our relationship with money. In fact, someone once said if you want to see what someone really values then look at his or her checkbook or credit card statements. If you want to see what an organization values, look at its budget.

Every time there's a parable or an encounter in scripture having to do with money, Jesus turns the table—metaphorically or literally—on anything which values wealth over justice, money over people, and mammon over ethics. In today's Gospel lesson he says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It's a question of priority and focus. Where is our attention focused?

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus commands us, "Sell your possessions, and give alms." Elsewhere in the Gospels, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and give to those who ask of you. In other words, do not neglect the needy. This, in part, is the inspiration for the segment I say before the Lord's Prayer, which I borrowed from our bishop: "Taking the hand of a person near you, and filling the spaces within the pews, so that we may remember that if anyone lacks bread, it is our responsibility to provide it; and that if any stands in need of forgiveness and reconciliation, we are called to be part of God's reconciling presence in the world."

Given this theme of where our focus and priorities are, the second parable Jesus tells is an interesting one. It again is about where our focus and attention is, and in it he turns social order on its head. "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them." Did you catch that when Deacon Pam was proclaiming the Gospel—the reversal of the master serving the slaves? In other words, keep alert, keep your focus clear and your priorities straight and great is the reward. And the reward is not an egoic reward like the rewards this world offers—our reward comes in the intimacy of a relationship with the master, namely God.

One thing that really strikes me is how this passage begins. “Do not be afraid, little flock...” At least six times in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus or angels utter this reassurance, “Do not be afraid...” Every time we see this phrase, however, might beg the question, “Why?” Just saying, “Don’t be afraid” when life’s situations are fearful isn’t any more potent than telling someone who’s anxious, “Don’t be anxious.” We however, are invited into fearlessness not because God’s got our back in some magical sense, like there’s some force field that keeps us invincible. We all know that we aren’t invincible and sometimes seemingly bad things happen to faithful devoted people, so where’s this reassurance come from? Where does our fearlessness come from?

I believe it comes from the fact that God is bigger than all of this, that God is more powerful than all the forces on the face of this earth, and God is love. If there is a force of love, more powerful than the most violent sea and more powerful than the deepest hatred...then that’s something to pay attention to. But God doesn’t always work in magical and supernatural ways. In fact, most often God works in common ways, through you and me, common people and common things. In fact, in the Holy Communion today our faith teaches that God comes to us in the simple things of bread and wine. As we consider the omnipotence of God at work in the world, there’s a story I want to tell you, that

Once upon a time a religious man found himself on top of a roof during a great flood. A man comes by in a boat and says, “Get in, get in!” The religious man replies, “No, I have faith in God, he will grant me a miracle.”

Later the water is up to his waist and another boat comes by and the guy tells him to get in again. He responds that he has faith in God and that God will give him a miracle. With the water at about chest high, another boat comes to rescue him, but he turns down the offer again because, “God will grant me a miracle.”

With the water at chin high, a helicopter throws down a ladder and they tell him to get in, mumbling with the water in his mouth, he again turns down the request for help for the faith of God. He arrives at the gates of heaven with broken faith and says to Peter, “I thought God would grand me a miracle and I have been let down.” St. Peter chuckles and responds, “I don't know what you're complaining about, we sent you three boats and a helicopter.”

This man was expecting God to come in a grand a spiritual way, but God was working through the people around this man. God was bringing life to this man through the service of those present to him. Throughout the scriptures we are spoken of as the body of Christ. Our fearlessness comes through knowing that God is working in powerful and mysterious ways, through a tapestry of hearts and souls opened to the work of the Gospel. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow. This work is ours to do, and we can do it with abandon, fearlessly casting this as our utmost priority as we know that ultimately God’s at work in ways much larger than we can see.

I know it’s atypical to have secular music in a worship service, but my buddy Zeal was in town from Los Angeles and I asked him to sing the offertory today, a song of his *Fly Free From Fear*. This song captures the essence of today’s Gospel lesson in its refrain:

*“Let’s fly from fear. Let’s do our part to help the Earth while we are here.”*

When the offertory comes, I invite you into this song as a prayer for us all to flee from the Sin of Sodom—from arrogance and unconcern, to be God’s hands in the world. Typically our worship songs are praise we are singing to God, but imagine these words as a song from Christ to you, indeed a response to our prayers.

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