

Borderland

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I'll never forget the first time I flew in a plane. It was at the Rhinebeck Air Show in Rhinebeck, NY and my age was not yet a double digit. The plane I rode in was a single prop WWI era model with an open cockpit. I don't remember every detail of the ride, but I do remember being nervous, especially when the pilot would roll the plane to the side to afford my father and me a better view of the vast Hudson River Valley below, but more, I remember being mesmerized. Seeing the world from that height filled me with a sense of awe and wonder different from any I'd ever experienced on the ground. That experience persists to this day even when I fly in planes much larger and higher than in that tiny plane over upstate New York so many years ago.

One of the things that always prompts some reflection on my part when I fly is that the lines we draw on maps and globes to indicate borders aren't visible. Sure, one can observe what some refer to as natural borders- a river or mountain range- but most of the borders that we have drawn over the course of human history, dividing up people and resources, often at great cost, are in fact borders of our own creation. Which points to another fact, created borders may not only be crossed, they can be redrawn too. And not just land borders.

"...do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." (Gen 19: 8). Such was the plea of Lot, resident of the city of Sodom.

Now, many of us have heard, learned or been told by various religious leaders and more than a few political leaders, that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, found in Genesis is about God's condemnation of homosexuality. Indeed, from roughly the 12th century the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with a few other texts in the Bible have been used as texts of terror against homosexuals.

If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or what we LGBTQ folk call a straight ally, chances are you have been slapped upside the head with this text, at least figuratively. I certainly have. Indeed, for too long parts of the Bible have been used selectively as a tool of oppression, hatred, and violence against various peoples including people who are seen as different from or a threat to, the dominant, so-called "norm."

It's not that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is devoid of sexual content. In the story, some male residents of Sodom do in fact express their desire to sexually assault two angels disguised as men who are guests of Lot. Yet, while many religious leaders and political officials have pointed to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as evidence of God's condemnation of homosexuality, the prophet Ezekiel has a different take,

"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."(16:49).

Makes one wonder, how do efforts by Elon Musk and his boss to close down USAID sit with the God whom the latter claims saved him so he could return to office?

Other Hebrew prophets...Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah reference Sodom as well, listing sins ranging from injustice and oppression to partiality and encouraging evildoers. Hmm. Again, it makes one wonder, if any of those swaggering tech bros at DOGE or recent cabinet appointees are listening? What about Mr. Vance, the VP who fancies himself a reputable interpreter of Catholic moral theology? Or our members of Congress and Supreme Court, so many of whom exhibit a fondness for pontificating, moralizing, and appealing to America's "Christian roots" from their secular positions of power. Have they ever heard of Isaiah or Jeremiah? Maybe not.

Of course, there's also the Book of Wisdom which names the sin of Sodom as, "a bitter hatred of strangers." (19:14-16).

My, my, my, imagine that. Hate spewed at immigrants, transgender people, people of color, in other words strangers...anyone whose experience is foreign or unknown to you because it is not yours. Yeah, hating them is a sin.

And even if your Bible doesn't include the Book of Wisdom there's 1 John (4:20), "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Jesus too makes reference to Sodom in Matthew's Gospel. When sending his disciples off to do the work of love, he adds, "Whatever town or village you enter...If any one will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more

tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town.” (10:5-15).

Now, if the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed about God’s condemnation of homosexuality how could all those prophets, including Jesus, somehow miss it? Simply put, the story is not about homosexuality at all. Indeed, it is really a story about borders, those dividing lines we draw within that become manifest without.

In the story a mob of local men demand to have their way with strangers Lot is hosting. It is that Lot’s guests are strangers, not that they are male, that provokes the mob. Odd as it may seem to us today, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah uses the threat of sexual assault, an act of humiliation and violence, to make a point about something as sorely lacking in the world today as it surely was in the city Sodom: hospitality.

In the ancient world, hospitality, literally offering shelter, food, and protection to strangers and vulnerable travelers was not only a social norm, but to many, a moral obligation. It is strange then that many a contemporary preacher, politician and person of faith claiming a desire, even call, to protect and preserve a faith and country they love, can’t seem to grasp this. Especially when the prophets are rather plain in describing just what inhospitality looks like: pride, excess wealth, injustice, oppression, hatred of strangers, a refusal to help the needy, etc.

But these are not the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah alone. They are the sins of all oppressive social, economic, and political policies and systems ancient and modern. Collectively, they violate that most basic of religious and moral insights: that we all share a common source and destiny which binds us inextricably to one another. Yet today, hospitality extended to anyone outside of one’s family, tribe, or nation, is often viewed with suspicion or as wasteful, unwarranted, or undeserved charity.

Perhaps you identified with the cry of the psalmist from this morning’s reading,

“Be gracious to me, Oh God, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also...”

I admit I cried the first time I read this Psalm. It put to words anguish all too familiar to me growing up gay. My eyes still well with tears almost every time I read it. For the psalmist writes with intimate knowledge of what it is like to be talked about and treated as other, as non-existent, and to have one’s worth

and dignity as a human being, a child of God, if you will, not only questioned, but denied. Indeed, the psalmist, to put it plainly has his doubts about the human race. He cries out for shelter, for justice.

Like so many today, targeted by the current cult of cruelty here and around the world, he cries out for hospitality in an inhospitable world.

As Unitarian Universalists rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but who today draw from many sources of wisdom, both sacred and secular, we are something of spiritual misfits as religions go. As such, living in a world scarred by hatred and maimed by a lack of empathy, the call to hospitality awaits our emphatic response. And which is a far deeper practice than the smiles, slice of cake, and platitudes, that pass for hospitality today.

Indeed, the late theologian and writer Henri Nouwen described hospitality as, “primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring [people] over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.”

Nouwen presents hospitality as a paradox in that it seeks, “to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.”

These insights reveal hospitality to be first and foremost an attitude toward others that recognizes and values each person’s individuality. If there is a motive attached to such an attitude, it is simply as Thoreau said in our call to worship, “that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible.”

This, of course, presents a challenge. For we all labor, at least in part, under the delusion that the world would be a better place if everyone would just adopt our way of seeing and being in the world. But this is a way our species draws borders within and erects barriers to inclusion without. And we are seeing this play out in a dramatic fashion in America right now with the new Administration’s efforts to purge or push aside anything and anyone that doesn’t share its worldview. It is an age old defensive protest as Nouwen, writes, “against the absurdities of human existence” born of our illusion, “that we know what life is all about, that we rule it and determine its values as well as

its goals.” Nonetheless the dangers are real and the suffering that ensues unnecessary.

The practice of hospitality seeks to mitigate both the danger and suffering. Thus it requires a survey of the borderlands within and a willingness to cross or even redraw those borders. Sometimes this might mean extending them outward, pulling them in, or simply making it easier to go back and forth. For as Nouwen observes, “Someone who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions, and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of another.” Nouwen’s observation makes clear hospitality might mean pulling in our borders to leave out our inner “know it all” or expanding them to encompass some appreciation for the mystery of life.

Likewise, Nouwen notes, “When our heart is filled prejudices, worries, jealousies, there is little room for the stranger.” Thus our borders may need to be redrawn to leave out or make more room around our preconceived ideas about who people are, how the world works, and what really matters.

Now, it may seem to some that with all we’ve heard and said about hospitality being the creation of “space for the stranger” to be “free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations” that true hospitality means anyone and anything goes.

But this is not the case.

As Henri Nouwen points out, “Receptivity is only one side of hospitality. The other side, equally important, is confrontation.” Confrontation as an equally important element of hospitality puts to rest the idea that hospitality means making oneself a doormat, or as Nouwen writes, “a neutral nobody”.

As you might surmise, confrontation as an element of hospitality concerns establishing clearer boundaries and flexible limits that Nouwen says, “confronts [the stranger] by an unambiguous presence, not hiding ourselves behind neutrality but showing our ideas, opinions, and life style clearly and distinctly.” Confrontation may sound aggressive, but it really describes honoring and living one’s uniqueness as an individual or group. The point of confrontation is not to win over a stranger or have them adopt one’s ways as their own, but to invite awareness and critical exploration of their own.

By now most of us are aware of the avalanche of Executive orders coming out of DC that promote and exacerbate the sins of Sodom in modern America: pride, excess wealth, injustice, oppression, hatred of strangers, a refusal to help the needy.

In response Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) President Sofia Bentancourt wrote, “Our work must be to challenge the bad theologies and oppressive systems that support them.” Of course, as we learned from our story for all ages today, “Sometimes cooperation isn’t easy and you have to think creatively to help make change.”

And indeed hospitality, with elements of both receptivity and confrontation, when practiced faithfully, [not perfectly, but faithfully], offers us a creative way to counter the “bad theologies” and “oppressive systems” upon which the current cult of cruelty rests.

The practice of hospitality requires action but not busyness.

A place to start is by curating your news intake and sources and to use the time you save from giving up doom scrolling to develop a stillness practice. Pray, meditate, walk, swim, whatever... just give yourself a break from the chatter of a fearful, opinionated world. You’ll need it to travel to that borderland within to survey, redraw, or cross your borders, increase your receptivity, and deepen your practice. This is the foundation of the practice of hospitality, that will allow you to increasingly act from a place of stillness rather than react out of the restlessness of fear.

To further your practice here are six things you can do:

1. Connect with community. If you’re here today, you’re off to a good start. I love seeing people at worship, but we’ve got committees and other groups who’d love to see you too, even if just once in while.
2. Get involved. If you’re involved in something locally or support causes that reflect your values, great, continue, they need you. If not, or you want and can do something more, Help our religious explorers support the Guilford Food pantry this month. Or, as some of you are doing, become a Notary to assist with patients and parents from targeted communities arranging guardianship for their children in case the parents are deported.
3. Speak up. I know some of you have attended recent rallies in Hartford, New London, and Old Saybrook protesting inhospitable actions and policies like

cuts to USAID funding and Project 2025 and I recently attended a town hall with Senators Murphy and Blumenthal. Now, if you can't get out or attend a protest, call your legislators and tell them you're concerned by what's going on. Let them know, for example, that the revocation of ICE Sensitive Locations Policy violates your First Amendment rights, your religious values, including hospitality, and may deter people from attending services.

4. Check in with others. Especially family, friends, and colleagues who are also people of color, immigrants and undocumented folk, and LGBTQ+. People who are specifically being targeted by inhospitable policies, orders, and attitudes.

5. Make your heart a refuge. If you're not sure where to start, your name tag here at church offers something you can do today. Put a rainbow/Pride and pronoun sticker on your name tag. Be a welcoming presence for people cowardly politicians and corporate leaders pretend don't exist.

6. Invite. Invite a friend to church or a church sponsored event. Share this faith and this community with them, no obligations.

These are but a few ways to begin. I'm sure you will come up with many more things in conversation with one another during fellowship over some stone soup, keeping in mind as Nouwen reminds us, "Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for people and obligatory for us as a people of faith to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings."

Friends, these are hard times and despair is easy. There is much beyond our control that leaves us restless to nonetheless do something. I concede it may not grab much attention, seem big, or always feel adequate against the swell of anxiety you feel, but the wisdom of the ages and the headlines of our day remind us, hospitality, a practice that encompasses both stillness and movement is a response that is needed, it is a response that all of us can choose, and it is a response that is the building block of a world with "as many different persons as possible" living more kindly and generously together.

Although it pains me as I know it does you to see so many cheer and participate in the present cult of cruelty, there is no lasting peace to be found in anything other than living our values openly and authentically, which now, as in every era, calls us to journey to the borderland of our hearts and practice hospitality!

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be