

Bring Water, Provide Shade
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READINGS

From Ancient Revelation – Genesis 18:1-8

God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mam're, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

**From Continuing Revelation – "Interbeing"
From *Peace Is Every Step*, by Thich Nhat Hanh**

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, "inter-be."

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow...And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

...Everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here - time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat... "To be" is to *inter-be*. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to *inter-be* with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

SERMON

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A few years ago, filmmaker and social commentator Michael Moore created a television show called “The Awful Truth.” This show was a series of half-hour episodes that were both satiric observations about society and a form of social activism. I have the series on DVD, and in one episode, Michael Moore recruits a dozen gay men to join him on a cross-country journey in a huge pink recreational vehicle, which he dubs “the Sodomobile.” Their mission is to visit the 20 or so states that have Sodomy laws, and then break those laws in the camper!

This episode is provocative (to say the least), but Moore also infuses the painful issue of gay bashing with a sense of humor. At one point, the Sodomobile makes a stop in Pascagoula, Mississippi, at the home of former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. A little known fact about Senator Lott is that he was a cheerleader in college. So as a way to “communicate in his language,” as Moore puts it, the gay men step out of the RV in cheerleader outfits, and give a pep rally cheer spelling out the word “Queer.” They remain cheering on the front lawn until they are ushered off the property by a police officer.

While on the one hand Moore provides a delightful and refreshing counter to bigotry, what he uncovers and presents is also a profoundly sad and moving chronicle of the poor condition of compassion and hospitality in the United States. What was most disturbing to me in this episode was the footage of Moore’s interaction with Pastor Fred Phelps, a hard-line anti-gay crusader from Topeka, Kansas, who has traveled from Vermont to Hawaii to picket the funerals of gay men, including Matthew Shepard. He and his followers carry eight-foot high signs declaring statements like “AIDS cures fags” and “Ye are of your father, the Devil.”

At one point, Michael Moore talks with Pastor Phelps about the death of Matthew Shepard, the 21-year-old Wyoming man who was beaten to death because he was gay and left hanging on a barbed-wire fence. On film, Pastor Phelps describes the subsequent media coverage as an “insane orgy of homosexual propaganda and lies. Every fag group in the country was using that poor dead boy as a poster boy, to promote their filth and encouraging all the youth of America to hold him up as someone to emulate. He was not a good man. This was not a good thing he did. He’s in hell now. That’s what needs to be preached.”

I am left to wonder at Pastor Phelps’ hatred. I do not know what demons pursue him so relentlessly that he is driven to be so cruel. I do know he is divisive, mean, and uses passages from the Bible to support his hatred for homosexuals. And I am incredulous at how Phelps presumes to know the mind of God.

I believe each person has access to the divine and is in relationship with all that is larger than our individual selves. I believe our “spirituality” helps us discover the nature of this relationship. As a liberal religion, we view access to spirituality as a process of continual revelation: we may look to both Michael Moore’s TV show and the Hebrew Bible for inspiration and revelation. In these times of hate and violence and war, I am drawn to the study of ancient texts to determine, uncover, or reclaim ancient interpretations of inclusion and acceptance.

At the bottom of each of Fred Phelps’ protest signs is a reference to a Biblical passage, supposedly declaring God’s hatred of homosexuals. But as I suspected, when I looked up the quoted passages in the Bible, they merely speak about how God will make judgments on people. The passages say nothing about homosexuality or Sodomy. In fact, neither the word

“homosexuality” nor the word “Sodomy” ever appears in the Bible. Not once. How is it then, that Pastor Phelps, and people like him, can claim biblical support for homosexual hate? For me, it is a clear case of fear and misinterpretation. If we are to respond to the accusations that homosexuality is a crime against nature and against God, it is important that we look at the biblical passages that inspire misinterpretation.

In Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, the story of Lot is the “poster child” for fundamentalists who hate homosexuals. Abraham and his nephew, Lot, live in the western part of Israel. Eventually they acquire so many livestock and possessions that they cannot share the same land. In a friendly separation, Abraham settles in Canaan, while Lot travels east to the Jordan River, a lush floodplain reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Though he is a stranger, Lot settles in the city of Sodom and makes his living there. Years later, two travelers enter Sodom and Lot offers them hospitality, bows low to the ground when they approach, welcomes them into his home, and provides a feast for them. Before bedtime, however, the men of the city surround Lot’s house and demand that Lot release his guests to the mob for the men in the mob to rape them. In response, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the mob, saying “only do nothing to these men [the two guests], for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” The mob refuses Lot’s offer of his daughters and begin to attack Lot’s house. The two strangers turn out to be angels sent from God, they strike the mob blind and then help Lot and his family escape. The angels then destroy both Sodom and its neighboring city, Gomorrah, because of the wickedness of these settlements.

This story has always been difficult for me to reconcile. It is clear that issues of homosexual rape are in this story, but that never seemed to be enough support for the theology that “God hates homosexuals.” And though I am in disbelief over Lot’s offer of his virgin daughters to the mob, I also see an admirable quality in Lot’s defiant protection of strangers who came to be in his care under his roof.

It is important to recognize the difference here between fundamentalist and liberal interpretations of this story. For Fundamentalists, the part about the mob wanting to rape strangers is proof that Sodom’s “wickedness” is homosexuality. Through a liberal religious interpretation though, and a reading I of course feel is more accurate, we may see that the real issue is not homosexuality, but hospitality.

In the ancient world, hospitality related to two groups of people: the resident alien and the traveler. Though aliens could not own land, the law still protected them. The traveler, on the other hand, was extremely vulnerable. The desert was a harsh place. For a traveler, access to water and food was a matter of life and death, and most settlements were built near available water or wells. The traveler needed access to the water, but it was also important for the settled community to have protection from potential invaders. As a result, strict codes of conduct developed to govern encounters between the traveler and the settled community.

Whether these codes are historically based in human conventions, or are the words of an anthropomorphic God speaking “His” law, the effect would be the same on people living by these codes. In more than 600 passages throughout the Hebrew Bible, God commands people to be hospitable to the alien, the orphan, the widow, or the sojourner. In Leviticus God says, “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.” In Deuteronomy, God says, “When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow... You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”

It is not surprising that sometimes a gap, and a tension, exists between a call to be hospitable in a hostile land, and our human behaviors that fall short of that call. We humans fall short of even our own worthiest goals, not to mention divine laws. Part of the tension though, between hearing a call and falling short of that call, is eased through attitudes of compassion and acts of forgiveness, whether human or divine. When encountering the “other,” the “alien” or the “stranger,” it is important to remember our own faults and vulnerability. No one is all good or all bad. We are, at different times, the oppressed and the oppressor, the powerful and the destitute. So we are reminded to act with compassion and hospitality in the book of Exodus when God says, “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”

As an ideal example of hospitality in a parallel story prior to Lot’s, Abraham sees three strangers appear at his tent in the desert “in the heat of the day.” He immediately jumped up and “ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground, [and said] “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant” (Genesis 18:2-5).

Under the rules of hospitality, whether from divine law or human awareness, *everyone* in the human community is welcome, both the native and the alien. Arising from the harsh conditions of the desert, and metaphorically because of the harsh conditions in the world, we are called as a religious community to be an oasis, being hospitable and welcoming each other – feeding, clothing and loving the stranger as we love ourselves.

The fundamentalist interpretation of Lot’s story as “God hates homosexuals” is an attitude that refuses to hear the call to be compassionate, generous and welcoming – to ourselves and toward those who are unknown to us. It is an attitude that abdicates personal and communal responsibility for humanity and for our natural world. It is also an attitude that has no biblical grounding or basis.

It is true that in Leviticus, the death penalty is pronounced for any man who sleeps with another man. Yet, the death penalty is also a consequence for adultery and incest. The word “Sodom” is used dozens of times in the Hebrew bible, and is a symbol or metaphor for evil, but in not one single instance is that evil described as “homosexuality.” The angels who visit Lot do not destroy Sodom because it is full of homosexuals. They destroy Sodom because the people who reside there did not follow God’s commandments to be hospitable and compassionate. In fact, Ezekiel states that Sodom’s guilt is that “she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).

It is ironic how so much anger and hatred has been the result of a straight and narrow reading of a Biblical story, how so much inhospitality, arrogance, condemnation and even murder have been the result of a story about God’s call to be compassionate, welcoming and hospitable. The story of Sodom is not about homosexuality, it is a story that questions how well we are responding to the call from *that which is larger than ourselves* to offer compassion and hospitality to the stranger within us and among us.

We have a tradition in our Western culture and religion, of sectioning ourselves off from one another, even compartmentalizing parts of our selves, placing boundaries around our houses, our cultures and races, states and countries, diminishing into discord between “liberal” and “conservative,” “saved” and “damned.” But the law of hospitality called the ancient Israelites to

treat the “other,” the alien, as one of their own. The law of hospitality forces us to come face-to-face with what scares us, whether it is a deep personal psychological demon or a masked Iraqi fighter waving a rocket launcher in the air.

The issue we face, especially in an increasingly pluralistic world, is not whether we are in relationship with others. The issue we face is how aware are we of our relationship with others. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here - time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat... "To be" is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.”

Perhaps the prophet Ezekiel, rather than being simply an angry mouthpiece for God, was also sad, tired, and pleading with the people of his country, the people he loved, when he said:

See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths. In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood...you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed, and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries. Those who are near and those who are far away will mock you, O infamous city, full of turmoil (Ezekiel 22:4-9).

In these days of killing, abuse, social injustice and just plain meanness, we exist in a *globe* “full of turmoil.” The world can be a harsh place, but the law of hospitality allows us to create an oasis. As Abraham did in that story long ago, we are called to run out to welcome our guest – the stranger, the alien, the enemy, the homeless, the widow, the orphan – to bow down to our neighbor and say, “Let a little of my water be brought, wash your feet, and rest yourselves under my tree.”