

***"What was the real sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?"*** By Lone Jensen  
Sermon for March 11, 2007.

Yes, I admit it, listening to Lot's story is difficult. This is certainly not a Bible passage I would choose for its beauty or its morality. For beauty the Psalms or the Song of Solomon would do much better. For morality the prophet Amos, who spoke for those who had no voice of their own, the poor, the dispossessed and the powerless would be a better choice. A reassurance: if you are a guest here today, have no fear, this will be no "hell fire and brimstone" sermon. Hell, I believe, is a place we humans can create here on earth and within our minds but there is no hell waiting for us anywhere else.

How many of you have actually read this story as an adult? When I first heard Lot's story, as a child, in my mind's eye it played much like big Hollywood Disaster movie with evil villains and a few survivors struggling away from the smoking ruins, set against a sky red with fire. I saw it sort of like the Poseidon Adventure set in the desert with Gene Hackman, as Lot. Even at ten years old I thought it very cruel of God to turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for something so human and natural as looking back at all she had lost, her town and her former home. I did shiver with the kind of fear children get from ghost stories but the moral was lost on me. There must have been

children in those cities, I thought and animals too and what had they done to deserve this?

Terrible tragic disasters and tragedies will happen in our chaotic and unpredictable world. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and hurricanes strike with cruel indifference and even insurance companies call them acts of God. But are they? The God portrayed in Lot's story is an angry God and not the God of love our Universalist tradition proclaims. When we witness tragedies we are shaken to our core and seek reassurance. If we can convince ourselves that the victims had a hand in their own destruction and were in some way to blame, then some control over our fate seems to be restored. But this is an illusion. We live in a Universe where very bad things happen sometimes to very good people. Hurricanes do not discriminate. So it is easy to imagine how this story may have been used to explain a real natural and random disaster and destruction with a cautionary moral tale. I remember one young man I met near the Grand Canyon shortly after the hurricane Katrina and the flood aftermath ravaged New Orleans. He was from South Carolina and no stranger to hurricanes but told me with great conviction, standing there dressed in his cowboy hat and boots with a beer can in his hand, slurring his words slightly, that his mama told him it was all those people committing all sorts of sins in the Great Easy that made God punish this guilty city. Not the God I believe in, I replied with fervor.

Not my Universalist God, who is love. It is relatively easy for most of us here to dismiss that old Testament vengeful God as a deeply immoral concept.

But when it comes to sin, ah, there is the rub. Many Unitarian Universalists are not really comfortable talking about sin, as such, since it carries way too much old hurtful theological baggage and seems, well so unreasonable. Sin to my mind is doing serious harm to others or to one's own self but it is a human construct. God, however you see him, her or it, God and the All Embracing Universe has better things to do than keep track of our failings. No thunderbolt will strike us when we sin and frankly we are saved, not by fear, but by our own conscience. Sodom and Gomorrah, the very names in popular use are synonymous with a multitude of sins and sexual prejudice. Lot's story is being used to justify prejudice and homophobia. All of this is done in the name of religion, all in the name of a loving God. How can we keep quiet in the midst of this? If we really believe as we say that each human being has an inherent worth and dignity, how can we be silent as some are condemned, not for any crimes committed, but simply for being? We stand on the side of love and we better know what we are talking about. Homophobia is an ugly word and yet no one growing up in this country or in the Western World is immune to this prejudice. Its roots grow deep in ignorance and it is watered by fear of the stranger. Lot's story is part and parcel of that fear. Because

according to some interpretations the terrible sin that causes the destruction of those two cities was homosexuality. But was it? And if not what was the real sin of this defamed city?

To answer this question let us look closer at this story. It is a harsh tale, unrelenting, a favorite among those who would like to dismiss the entire Bible as superstition not worthy of attention. For others it is hard to read because it conflicts with their idea of a loving God. Certainly the view of God presented here is vengeful. It is an image of the destructive forces in the Universe but with a purpose, to punish the unjust. The Universe I know does not act this way. Pompeii disappeared one sunny morning because at that precise moment the molten core pressure had built to a certain point and the mountain erupted in a fury of dark clouds. Perhaps one sunny morning, in just such a manner, did the two unlucky cities of Sodom and Gomorrah disappear in a cloud of fire? Random destruction is hard to accept. It is easier to blame the victims. Thus we say, Lot's wife turned back, they got what they deserved or in modern terms, she wore revealing clothes and what was she doing in that part of town anyhow? Our ideas of the Ultimate reality are often all too human, reflecting both what is best and what is worst in our nature. This story may reflect our wish for an orderly Universe but there is also I think an age old human wish to seek revenge and wipe out our

enemies. Who among us have not been angry enough to understand that urge?

When we make God in our image, we have in Hinduisim, Shiva who is both creator and destroyer. In the Hebrew Bible we have earlier in Genesis the life giving Spirit that hovered over the waters and here in Lot's story, the God who destroys.

But what was the real sin? Lot, the righteous man in the story, holds one ultimate value highest of all, higher even than his own family's welfare. It is the desert survival value of ultimate hospitality. The real sin is inhospitality. Lot welcomed the two strangers, who were really angels in disguise, and he entertained them quite unawares. He took them into his home, fed them, offered them comfort and defended them against an angry mob. Lot does this by what appears to our modern eyes to be a deeply immoral act. He offers up the sacrifice of his own daughters who are nameless in the story. They are not asked for their permission. Lot may have said this to shame the mob but it does not diminish our instinctive horror at such a trade. But the central virtue in the story fits the historical times in which the story was written. For a desert people only recently settled hospitality ensured survival. A stranger left to his or her own devices in a climate as inhospitable as the land of the Canaanites would soon be dead. Water and food were scarce and shelter from the cold nights or from the heat of the sun hard to find. A traditional

Bedouin would defend his guests at the cost of his own life even if these guests were his mortal enemies. When I lived in Baghdad years ago, my Western educated husband, would upon occasion to my occasional despair, bring home wayfaring strangers on their way to the Far East. In Lot's story the city people committed several sins. The first was inhospitality. The angels in disguise were about to sleep in the street when Lot invited them to his house. The mob wanted to attack the strangers. One could use the term xenophobia, or fear of strangers, to describe their behavior. For those who still use this story to condemn homosexuality contemporary scholars offer counter arguments. There are only eight references to homosexuality in the entire Bible. But in fact many of these are mistranslations. The terms homosexuality and heterosexuality are modern, developed at the end of the last century when a lifelong, constitutional orientation toward the same sex was acknowledged.

Dr. Virginia Mollenkott writes: *"The fact is that the word homosexual does not occur anywhere in the Bible. No extant text, no manuscript, neither in Hebrew nor Greek, Syriac, nor Aramaic, contains the word."* One has to assume that the majority of the townspeople were heterosexuals. Their attempt at gang rape is not about sexuality but about violence, it is an angry act designed to humiliate the strangers.

Lot welcomed the angels. But to the rest of the town they were strangers. They did not see that there were angels among them. This theme is common throughout the Bible and it is found in fairy tales all over the world.

The stranger appears decrepit looking, often in rags, often as an old feeble woman or man and is despised by all but the hero or heroine, who treats them kindly and is properly rewarded. *The stranger*, writes Roy Phillips, *is a spiritual challenge because they bring us face to face with ourselves. When we look at the unknown face, at those whom we think are not like us, we can either see an angel or we can see someone to be feared and despised. We can condemn or we can bless, the choice is ours.* How often have society refused to see or acknowledge the human angels in our midst? They were the prophets who gave voice to the downtrodden and asked us to remember our common humanity. In the last century the abolitionists spoke up against slavery even as many respectable preachers said from their pulpits that the Bible condoned it, that to have slaves, was a Christian thing to do. As today some will say that it is Christian to condemn homosexuality and support the so called defense of marriage acts and defend so called family values. Whose family are they talking about? As a UU bumper stickers says: we are all family and we all have value.

Some weeks ago we were having a Worship Associates meeting in this sanctuary late at night. It was about 8.30 PM and we were discussing this sermon topic about welcoming strangers who might after all be angels in disguise. In that moment a young woman appeared at our door, that was propped open, since it was warm evening. She introduced herself as one of our neighbors and said she had been taking a walk and could she please use our bathroom? Kellie took her back there and we all looked at each other. Who was this young woman really? Why did she appear just at that precise moment? What better disguise, we joked, could an angel have, than to ask to use the bathroom! Call it synchronicity, but for a moment I entertained the notion that we had just shown an angel the way to the women' restroom.

It is natural to fear those we do not know. It is natural to want to talk to friends and avoid strangers. But I believe part of our mission is precisely to welcome the stranger and treat them as if they were indeed angels in disguise. And I will leave you with this question. What would be the disguise an angel would have to wear for you to not recognize them but be tempted to turn them away? And what blessings might you miss by doing so?