

HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

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SODOMY MEANS INHOSPITALITY:
The Tale of Sodom and Gomorrah

GENESIS 19:1–25

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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This resource was created for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources in partnership with the ecumenical Welcoming Church Programs:

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests
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Integrity USA
ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Inclusion
More Light Presbyterians
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Dedicated to

Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as
Executive Director and National Field Organizer
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

Introduction to Reader’s Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader’s Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn’t require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader’s theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader’s Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader’s Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God’s abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader’s Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God’s surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader’s Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants’ intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the “cultural sensitivities” that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word “Jewish” isn’t quite accurate; historically, we’d need to say “Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons” as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God’s surprising welcome, it’s an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it’s very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news” — *it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss
Easter 2013

Introduction

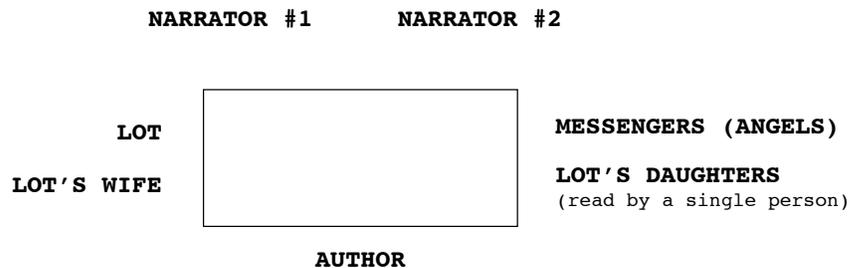
This script invites you to explore a scene from the Book of Genesis, chapter 19, from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Lot, (2) the Messengers (angels), (3) Lot’s Daughters, (4) Lot’s wife, (5) the Author, and (6-7) two Narrators. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of Lot’s wife and Daughters can be read by one person, or the Author’s role can be shared by two persons.

The largest role is the Author; the smallest one is Lot’s wife. The remaining roles are all about the same. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrators will guide you through the scenes, reading from Genesis to begin each brief conversation and offering occasional insights. The Narrators likely haven’t seen any of this material before either, so these persons aren’t “experts,” their role is simply to keep things moving along. You’ll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to take notes along the way, but follow the script until you’re invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn’t a play where the goal is “perfect performance;” rather, it’s a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of this important Genesis text.

Suggestion: *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrators sit at one end of the group, with Lot and Lot’s wife to one side and the Messengers and Lot’s daughters to the other side. The Author might sit opposite the Narrators. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR (1):**

Our task is to revisit this key passage about the events leading up to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and to reflect on it from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

LOT:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot**, the nephew of Abraham. Although Lot doesn't come across as a shining hero in this tale, it was his righteousness that prompted God to save Lot and his family from the intended destruction of Sodom.

LOT'S WIFE:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot's wife**. Like many female characters, Lot's wife appears in this biblical story but never gets to utter a word. The author uses her voice here to remind us that women have *always* been part of God's people – and their voices (even when unheard) have mattered.

NARRATOR (1):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (1)**. In this role I will read some of the direct biblical material. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

NARRATOR (2):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (2)**. In this role I will also read some of the direct biblical material, help us transition from scene to scene, and occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

MESSENGERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Messengers**. Although it becomes clear in the story that these "men" are indeed *angels*, their outward appearance doesn't show this; they look like ordinary "messengers."

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot's Daughters**. Although they speak no words in this episode, the author of this script demands that we dare to imagine their voice in this text.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the biblical **Author**. Although tradition names Moses as the author of Genesis, scholars today agree that Genesis was written later than Moses and was the product of several ancient authors (all unnamed) who collected the earliest stories of Israel's life. In any case, in my role in this Reader's Theater, I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

NARRATOR (2):

Our first scene opens as the angels arrive in town: "The two messengers arrived at Sodom in the evening, and found Lot sitting by the city gate. When he saw them, he rose to meet them, then bowed so deeply that he touched the ground, saying, 'Please, honorable travelers, come to your faithful one's house. Wash your feet, and refresh yourselves and spend the night. You can continue your journey in the morning.' 'No,' they answered, 'we will spend the night in the square.' But Lot urged them so strongly that they agreed to come to his house. Lot prepared a meal for them, baking unleavened bread, which they ate." (Genesis 19:1-3 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Now, although the translation used here (*The Inclusive Bible*) does indeed speak of two "messengers," most Bible translations call them "angels." That's what they are, but don't imagine people-with-wings. The Hebrew word used here simply means "messenger." And in most cases that's how it gets translated. Here, because these persons are on a mission from God, many biblical translations use the word "angels." But we need to remember they look entirely human. Nothing in their appearance

Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2 *TIB*)

alarms Lot or gives any indication that they're heavenly beings. And if you can't get angel wings out of your mind you won't understand what happens in this passage. Neither Lot nor the townsmen realize they're dealing with angels until the end of the scene. Lot is doing exactly as the writer of Hebrews urged in the New Testament: he's entertaining angels, but not because he knows they're angels. He thinks he's simply showing hospitality to strangers.

LOT:

That's right. And that's important. Because this tale is about hospitality, about offering welcome and refuge – especially to the vulnerable. And while these men don't look particularly vulnerable – after all, I address them as “honorable travelers” – they are unknown in these parts. And, in the ancient world, to be on the road and unknown *made you vulnerable*. I'm not trying to welcome heavenly guests into my home. I'm just trying to keep these two men out of the town square during the night.

MESSENGERS:

Although these verses don't indicate that we're anything more than human travelers on a journey, if you've read the last chapter (Genesis 18) you know who we are and what we're up to. In chapter 18 (verse 2), it says that “three travelers” came to visit Abraham and Sarah. In the course of that chapter you learn that these “travelers” are, in fact, God and the two of us. During this visit the birth of Isaac is foretold,

* (see next page) The Hebrew text literally says “her cry.” The medieval rabbis commented on this extensively. In the Chapters of the Rabbi Eliezer (25), it is written: “Rabbi Yehudah said, ‘They issued a proclamation in Sodom: Anyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the strangers will be burnt by fire. Peletit, daughter of Lot was married to one of the nobles of Sodom. She saw an afflicted poor man in the street of the city, and her soul grieved for him. What did she do? Every day when she went out to draw water, she put in her bucket all sorts of food from her home, and she fed that poor man. The people of Sodom said, ‘How does this poor man survive?’ Finally they discovered the matter – and brought her out to be burned. She said, ‘Lord of the world! Uphold my just cause against the people of Sodom!’ Her cry ascended before the Throne of Glory. The blessed Holy One said, ‘I will go down and see [if they have done altogether] according to her cry that has come to Me. If the people of Sodom have done according to the cry of this girl, I will overturn its foundations and its surface!’ – as is said: according to her cry. It is not written, according to their cry, but rather: according to her cry.” (Cited in *The Zohar 2: Pritzker Edition*, translated by Daniel Chanan Matt, Stanford University Press, 2004, Volume 1, page 145, footnote 224.)

For other references see:

<http://www.iwgonline.org/docs/sodom.html>

and at the end of it, God reveals our mission to Abraham, saying, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is terrible and their sin is so grave that I must go down and see for myself. If they have done what her cry* against them accuses them of, I will destroy them. If not, I need to know that, too." (Genesis 18:20-21 *TIB*) We were to be God's eyes and ears in Sodom.

LOT:

Of course, I didn't know that when I made my offer of hospitality. But perhaps I did know that the town square was not a safe place to spend the night. Perhaps it was my habit to sit by the town gate in the evening, just so that I could extend the refuge of my home to any travelers who might be passing through.

MESSENGERS:

And perhaps we intended to spend the night in the square because we knew that the outcry against Sodom had everything to do with what happened to those who were vulnerable in its midst.

AUTHOR:

Years later that reputation would be echoed by the prophets. Isaiah, speaking in the voice of God, accused Israel of acting like Sodom, saying, "You are the perpetrators who destroy my vineyard! What you've plundered from the poor is still in your house! Why do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the ground?" (Isaiah 3:14-15 *TIB*) He told them that in order to *no longer* be like Sodom and Gomorrah they must: "Learn to do good! Search for justice and help the oppressed! Protect those who are orphaned and plead the case of those who are widowed!" (Isaiah 1:17 *TIB*) Apparently these things were acutely absent in these cities. And Ezekiel calls Israel Sodom's "sister," and explains this metaphor by noting that Sodom "had abundant food and not a care in the world, but she refused to help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49 *TIB*)

MESSENGERS:

Can we be more clear? We were *not* sent to investigate the sexual practices of the cities. We were sent to discover whether it was true that widows and orphans, that the destitute and the traveler, were mistreated by the people who prospered in these parts. We were sent to

test their hospitality. Two thousand years later Jesus would tell his followers, whatever you do to “the least of my sisters or brothers” (Matthew 25:40 *TIB*) you do to me. Unassuming and unknown, we entered Sodom as “the least of these,” but we came as representatives of God.

NARRATOR (2):

Today we take for granted that when we’re traveling we’ll either have friends to stay with or we’ll find a motel room at the end of the day. But 4,000 years ago, when this tale is set, travel was a gamble. From sandstorms to daytime heat or nighttime chill, the weather was unforgiving. And from desert bandits to highway robbers to hostile villages, the human world in which travelers moved could be equally unforgiving.

AUTHOR:

That’s why hospitality held such a high place in ancient codes of ethics. It was a measure of an entire people’s character. Eventually hospitality became part of Israel’s ethos as a people – and it remains a hallmark of Judaism even in your day. Elsewhere in the Bible my people were often reminded that they spent years as sojourners themselves, especially in the generations they spent as slaves in Egypt. They knew what it was like to live precariously, at the mercy of others who were often less than merciful. Indeed, when Job defends himself as innocent during his time of suffering he exclaims as

Do not mistreat or oppress foreigners, for you once were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of widows or orphans. If you do afflict them, they will cry out to me – and be certain that I will hear their complaint. (Exodus 22:21-23 *TIB*)

Do not oppress foreigners, for you know what it is to be a foreigner – you were foreigners in Egypt. (Exodus 23:9 *TIB*)

When you reap the harvest from your fields, do not cut the grain to the very edges of the field, or gather in all the gleanings. Nor are you to completely strip your vines or pick up the fallen fruit. Leave the extra grain and fruit for the poor people and foreigners to gather for themselves. I am YHWH. (Leviticus 19:9-10 *TIB*)

Do not mistreat the foreigners who reside in your land. The foreigner who lives among you must be treated like one of your own. Love them as you love yourself, for you too were a foreigner in the land of Egypt. I am YHWH. (Leviticus 19:33-34 *TIB*)

Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don’t hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood! (Isaiah 58:7 *TIB*)

proof of his character, "Haven't the members of my household said of me, 'Is there anyone who hasn't eaten your food?' I've always taken in wayfarers for a night rather than make them spend the night in the open." (Job 31:31-32 *TIB*)

LOT:

Like Job, I valued hospitality within my faith and my culture – and I knew the dangers that might befall them in the town square. So I did not relent until they agreed to lodge under my roof. I made them a feast and we began to talk.

LOT'S WIFE:

Actually, he means that *I* made a feast. But it's telling that the story gives him the credit. See, in the ancient world, in ways that you can hardly imagine, women were barely worth mentioning. I'm not saying that there wasn't affection between Lot and myself, but everything in our culture said I was his property. A companion, yes, but property nonetheless, as were our daughters, too. It was a man's world back then. Verse 3 isn't the only place in this passage where the action, the voices, the lives of women are undervalued. So pay attention. But don't blame the author or Lot for this. Their words and attitudes were completely shaped by their world. You might wish they had thought differently, but you can't change them; you can only ever change yourselves. In any case, there was a feast. Everyone ate well, and the men talked long into night.

NARRATOR (1):

In the next scene, Lot's fears about the risk to the messengers (had they stayed in the town square) prove all too well-founded. We read: "Before they had retired to the sleeping quarters, the men of Sodom surrounded the house, young and old, down to the last man in town, yelling to Lot, 'Where are these travelers who entered your house today? Bring them out to us, and let us "know" them too!' Lot went out before the crowd, closing the door behind him, and pleaded with them saying, 'No, friends, don't do such a wicked thing.'" (Genesis 19:4-7 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Now listen, I gathered up and wrote down the stories of my people,

the folktales of how we came to be. See, people draw their lives from the stories they tell, especially the ones they tell again and again. In fact, a people without stories is not really a people at all. And, of course, all people like their stories to be heroic. And many of my stories *were* heroic, but it's just as important for a people's stories to be *honest*. And this story is about to become painfully honest. There are tales that felt almost venomous for me to record, but too important for me to forget. This is such a tale.

NARRATOR (2):

Notice who came to surround the house: all the men, from young to old, every last one of them. This was not the action of a handful of hooligans; this was *an entire town committed to terror*. It was a culture where violence had become a pastime. Did you know that in the late 1800's and early 1900's in parts of the Southern U.S. it was a popular pastime in some white families to bring children to lynchings of African Americans? They would even get photographs of the body hanging from a tree and turn them into postcards to send to family and friends. *That's* violence as a pastime. *That* was the culture of Sodom.

AUTHOR:

I hope you understand that when the townsmen tell Lot they want to "know" the men staying with him, they're not asking to be formally introduced. The Hebrew word translated as "to know" carries a wide range of meanings from knowledge to understanding to acquaintance to skill. But it is also the word used for sexual penetration. So Genesis 4:1 reads, "Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain." In that case, it means the intimacy of sexual love. In this case, outside Lot's home, the townsmen are announcing their intent to *gang rape* the travelers whom Lot had taken into his home.

LOT:

I still find such wickedness hard to imagine. This was the brutality of my world, at least in some corners. It was a common practice for the soldiers of a conquering army to rape the soldiers of the vanquished force. It was a way of humiliating them, of "reducing" them to a woman in a world where only men counted. And, occasionally, in towns like Sodom and Gomorrah, gang rape practiced against travelers was a way of saying, with a brutal emphasis: you're not welcome in these parts.

This wasn't about sex, either homosexual or heterosexual. It was about raw power, and finding someone on whom to wield it.

NARRATOR (1):

Because we've heard this story so often associated with same-sex activity it may be hard to hear it otherwise. But from *inside* the text, *inside* the history, *inside* the culture, it was a story about using terror to maintain power. Think of the worst things that happen during a college hazing or a gang initiation, or the unspeakable ways that anal rape in prisons reinforces power dynamics that have nothing to do with a consensual relationship. Worse, we know today of multiple organized methodical sexual atrocities carried out in the 20th century: from the Rape of Nanking to the use of rape as a *strategy* in the Bosnian and Kosovo wars and in Rwanda, Darfur, Zimbabwe, and Congo. Sodom was hardly the first community – and sadly far from the last one – to deploy sexual violence to terrorize the vulnerable. Both yesterday and still today whole communities have abused sexuality like this. It isn't hard to see, except when all the messages are telling you to look in another direction.

NARRATOR (2):

Next, in one of the most terrifying scenes in the Bible, Lot tries to persuade the townsmen not to attack his guests. “[And Lot said,] ‘Look, I have two young daughters who are virgins – take them and do whatever you want with them, but do nothing to these travelers, for they are enjoying the protection of my hospitality.’ But the crowd yelled, ‘Stand aside!’ They said, ‘This fellow Lot came into our community as a foreigner, and now he would play the judge. We will treat him to worse than his visitors!’ They crowded around Lot and pressed close in order to break down the door. But the travelers reached out and pulled Lot inside, shutting the door behind him. Then all the men who were at the door, great and small, were blinded by a dazzling light so that they were unable to find the entrance. (Genesis 19:8-11 *TIB*)

LOT:

Listen, you cannot comprehend what I did here unless you understand just how *sacred* the obligation of hospitality was in that time. These messengers had come under *my* roof. I was obliged – almost under an oath – to do whatever was needed to protect them. *Whatever was needed.*

LOT'S WIFE:

How is it that I was silent in these verses? How dare Lot offer my own daughters up to those beasts?! But where is *my* voice? Where are *my* words of protest? Left unrecorded... and most likely unspoken. My culture gave me no words to say in a moment like this. I am sure my mouth was open in a silent anguished cry, but it went unheard, except by the eyes of my daughters.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

We weren't silent. I can promise you that. Never mind that we had been raised to honor hospitality, too. We were virgins! Barely more than children, no doubt. And surely our terror spoke volumes. We screamed in protest. Who were we to be offered up like a sacrifice to satisfy the twisted desire for violence against someone vulnerable? Don't you see, our father offered us in exchange for the safety of the messengers because he was convinced that the townsmen didn't care whether they raped men or women. He was certain that any pound of flesh would do.

LOT:

Was I right to offer my daughters? I'll never know. But before you judge me, at least notice that I risked my own safety in daring to challenge the townsmen at all. Were it not for the holy messengers who pulled me back inside, my attempt to bargain with the townsmen would've resulted in my rape – or worse.

NARRATOR (1):

We'll never know why the men rejected Lot's offer of his own daughters. Most likely in their frenzied aggression they wanted to make their point – assert their power – in the strongest way possible. To violate the girls – even to violate Lot himself – would've stopped short of making their message most clear: "No one, not even male guests, is welcome here. In this place, everyone who is not an insider is *outside* in the most perilous way possible."

MESSENGERS:

We had seen enough by now. The outcry that had reached God – the voices of widows and orphans whose needs were ignored, the cries of the destitute and travelers whose lives had been violated – bore

witness against these men. Here, in their own voices, they condemned themselves. Our concern now was to insure the safety of Lot's family, both tonight... and tomorrow.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

We were glad the messengers were there – and that their powers were sufficient to keep us safe. Well, it would be more accurate to say we were “relieved.” We huddled together in the corner while our father and the messengers conferred at the table. Wrapped in a blanket against the night's chill, if we slept it came as the sparse gift of fear and exhaustion, not because we ever relaxed.

AUTHOR:

What these girls could not know is that the next time a tale like this played out in the Bible the woman does not survive. For the moment, the terror abates in my story. The next time it does not abate at all.

NARRATOR (2):

The other tale is found in Judges 19:1-30. There, in a story set about 800 years later than this one, a man and his concubine are traveling...

AUTHOR:

A concubine was a female companion akin to a mistress, perhaps. In the passage he is referred to as her “husband,” so their relationship has a status that's at least close to marriage. But, remember, in the ancient world, even marriage was about men keeping intimate property, not about love.

NARRATOR (1):

Along with a servant, the man and his concubine find themselves in the town square of a small city at the end of the day. They are taken into the care of a local man. And that night, men from the town surround the house and announce their desire to rape the male guest. The householder offers his virgin daughter and the man's concubine to pacify the men. But they want the male traveler. Their anger grows and then the traveler, apparently in fear for his life, pushes his concubine outside the door, where the men “took her away and raped her repeatedly all night long until the morning.” (Judges 19:25 *TIB*) The next morning her husband finds her collapsed outside the house. He

simply tells her to "get up," and when she can't he loads her on his donkey and heads home. She dies along the way.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

Don't you see, now? *These tales are about the abuse of power.* They have nothing to do with "appropriate" or "inappropriate" love. They aren't concerned with sexual orientation. Whatever judgments you make about same-sex love, it has nothing to do with this text from Genesis. When you interpret it that way you make our presence – our vulnerability – invisible in this text. You make our fear beside the point. But we, too, were among the least of these.

LOT'S WIFE:

My daughters have been invisible for so long! Isn't it time to really see them? Sure, readers of this story have felt sorry for them and have felt contempt for my husband, but they have also felt that the danger was never real. Readers have believed that it was, after all, a "gay mob" gathered outside. And what interest would they have in a couple of girls? But this second tale from Judges 19 makes the danger very clear. These mobs were never about sexual attraction, they were about raw abusive power. Nothing more.

NARRATOR (2):

This story concludes with Lot's escape and the destruction of the cities: "Then the two travelers asked Lot, 'Do you have anyone else here – daughters, sons, or their spouses, or anyone else in the city? Get them out of this place, for we are about to destroy it. The clamor against its people is terrible before YHWH, who sent us to destroy it.' So Lot went to his future sons-in-law, who were betrothed to his daughters, and said, 'Get out of the city, for YHWH is about to destroy it!' But the young men treated the warning as a jest. When the dawn broke, the travelers urged Lot, 'Come, flee with your spouse and your two daughters, or you will be swept away in the punishment of Sodom.' Lot hesitated, but because YHWH was merciful, the travelers took Lot, his spouse, and their two daughters by the hand, and led them out and left them outside the city." (Genesis 19:12-16 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (1):

Over the next few verses Lot is told to run for the hills, but he

asks permission to run instead to the nearest small town. The angels grant this, but we later learn that he's too scared even to stay there and winds up living in a cave with his two daughters. (Lot's wife famously looks back at Sodom's destruction and is turned into a pillar of salt.) Lot himself succumbs to what we today would call post-traumatic stress disorder. It is an unhappy ending to an unhappy tale. Our portion of the tale concludes: "Then YHWH rained brimstone and fire down from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying those cities and the whole plain, with all the inhabitants of the towns, and everything that grew on the land." (Genesis 19:24-25 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

It is a strange tale, I confess. Lot is apparently saved from destruction because he is righteous. (Immediately before this story Abraham has bargained with God about saving the handful of righteous from Sodom before destroying it.) But even Lot offers his daughters up for rape. He seems paralyzed by the angels' words that he must flee, and he is frozen by indecision over which direction to flee. Lot's righteousness seems marginal at best. In fact, by the end of the chapter Lot is a widower, hiding in a cave and fearfully isolating his daughters from a world that has proven too much for his nerves. The tale ends with his two daughters taking turns getting him drunk so they can sleep with him and become pregnant in order to have children. It is the sort of honest and ugly messiness that hides somewhere in many families. But it is hardly a folktale that offers examples of good behavior or even faithfulness.

MESSENGERS:

So why is this tale here at all? As Lot's daughters have argued, this tale has nothing to do with sexuality of any sort. But almost every Christian in your day would tell you immediately that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about God's judgment against homosexuality. It's true that the ancient world differed from yours in many ways, and its understanding of sexuality would strike you as plenty foreign as well. But our mission was to investigate the outcry made against the city, and when Ezekiel and Isaiah make reference to Sodom in their writings, they are clear that the "outcry" had to do quite specifically with *Sodom's treatment of the vulnerable ones in its midst*. In this tale, the threatened rape of us is simply the final damning bit of evidence

against them. We were the last of the “least of these” that the men of Sodom would ever threaten.

LOT’S DAUGHTERS:

It’s strange isn’t it? Until you recognize the *distance* that sits between this tale and your day, you can’t hear the way it just might describe situations that are *very close* to you.

AUTHOR:

That’s right. Nearly 2,000 years after this tale takes place, Jesus, like the prophets, echoes back to Sodom and Gomorrah. For 2,000 years their “reputation” has been recognized as examples of the worst sort of indifference shown to the marginal and inhospitality shown to travelers. In Matthew he says that even Sodom will have it easier on the day of judgment than those cities which refused to listen to him.

[Jesus said,] “As for you, Capernaum... if the miracles worked for you had taken place in Sodom, it would be standing today. But the truth is, it will go easier for Sodom than for you on Judgment Day.” (Matthew 11:24 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (2):

But Matthew also explains *why* these towns spurned Jesus’ message: because he was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19 *TIB*). The point being made by Jesus is not just that Sodom was also condemned by God, but that it was condemned *for its treatment of the marginal* – and yet even it will fare better than those towns who are put off by Jesus’ acceptance of those at the social and economic margins.

MESSENGERS:

In a similar passage in Luke, Jesus links Sodom directly to inhospitality. He sends his disciples out, two by two, to preach. They are instructed to travel without money or purse or sandals; they are to travel *intentionally vulnerable*, entrusting themselves entirely to the hospitality of the towns to which they go. When he says that those towns failing to welcome them will fare worse than Sodom on

[Jesus said,] “If the people of any town you enter don’t welcome you... I tell you, on that day the fate of Sodom will be less severe than that of such a town. (Luke 10:10,12 *TIB*)

judgment day, he chooses Sodom for a comparison not because of anything sexual about Sodom's sin, but because they were the best known example of a disastrous breach of hospitality. As badly as Sodom miscalculated the honor due their unknown guests, these towns have miscalculated even worse. Their inhospitality will cost them even more.

NARRATOR (1):

Whether Jesus was aware of Sodom as a town infamous for sexual perversity we do not know. What we *do know* is that he spoke of it as a city that epitomized the very things that his ministry sought to overcome: that is, attitudes and actions that exclude anyone from the community to which God beckons them.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

So you see when the distance across eras and cultures is respected – when you set aside the impulse to hear this story as condemning homosexuality – you can finally hear it as a story that actually condemns inhospitality. And at that point a troubling irony appears. Because while “sodomy” has come to be your word for the “sin” of homosexuality that so many in the church denounce, it suddenly seems more likely that “sodomy” – *as condemned in this tale* – is the very *inhospitality that the church practices*. Have you ever considered that?

* * *

[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]

NARRATOR (2):

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you've experienced in this Reader's Theater. Many persons today find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, those struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21st century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome persons who seem so other to us today, speaking as Lot, the Messengers, Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, the Author, and the Narrators, what would you say?*

[Go around the circle and invite each person to say as much or as little as they wish.]

[Note: If more than one small group has been reading a script, this next question is a chance to briefly collect some insights that you'll share with the whole group when you re-gather. Even though each small group will have read the same narrative, each group's experience of it will have been unique, so it's important for each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]

NARRATOR (1):

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either this passage from Genesis or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
2. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
3. Of the main characters in the script (Lot, the Messengers, Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, the Author, and the Narrators) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
4. What difference would it make if every church went through this passage like we did?

[Take just a few minutes to do this, recording a few thoughts to share with the whole group.]

A final word of thanks is in order. It is both a risk and a gift to step into such close engagement with a biblical text. In these encounters with God's radical love we may well find ourselves challenged and encouraged, but we will hardly find ourselves unchanged. Thank you for taking the risk.