

“Where is our Moral Outrage?”

By Wyndy Corbin Reuschling*

It is often customary, and perhaps somewhat perfunctory, when invited to speak in Chapel, or other such venues, to start with something like this: “I’m thrilled, or delighted, or excited, at the opportunity to be here today and share with you.” The topic that draws our attention is human trafficking. Therefore it would be more honest for me to start by stating that I’m not so thrilled or delighted or excited to address this issue because wouldn’t it be better if there was no such thing as human trafficking to address? This is not a topic that should thrill us, delight us or excite us. But it is an important and dire topic that draws our attention during this Global Christianity Conference and the focus on human trafficking.

As Christians, what are we to think of this issue and how are we to respond? As I think about human trafficking, I am drawn to a story in Scripture that may be familiar to us but contains a twist that we tend not to see, or one that we sadly ignore or overlook. The story is recorded for us in Genesis 19:1-11. It is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This particular story in Genesis 19 is part of the larger narrative of Abraham and his nephew, Lot, who parted ways back in Genesis 13. They had returned from Egypt and began to settle in the land the Lord had promised to Abram and his offspring. The accumulation of wealth and occupation of the land created tension between Abram and Lot, and their herdsmen. Eventually they parted ways and Lot “pitched his tents” near Sodom (Gen. 13:13). After a bloody battle, the goods of Sodom were carried away, along with Lot and his possessions since he was living in Sodom (14:12). After battle, the King of Sodom came to Abram, suggesting that Abram keep the goods as spoils of war. Instead he asked that Abram offer the people to him, including Lot (14:21-24) and offer which Abram declines. It might be interesting at this point to speculate what it might have been like for Lot to be treated as a possession, a spoil of war, a commodity to be traded, especially when we confront Lot’s later behavior in this larger narrative.

Later Abraham and Sarah are visited by “three men.” It is in this narrative that Abraham and Sarah are promised a son. It is also in this narrative that Abraham learns of the pending destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:16-21) and what the Lord will do. The Lord said, “*The outcry against Sodom and*

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Gomorrah is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me....." (Gen. 18:20-21). Even so, still Abraham pleads for the preservation of Sodom (18: 22ff), God relents, and Lot later returns to Sodom to live.

We meet the dubious Lot again, this time sitting in the public space of the gateway at entrance of the city (Gen 19:1). This may indicate that Lot was a person of prominence, and perhaps even a town leader. This was a privileged space for Lot. Lot greets the two visitors. They were likely the same visitors whom Abraham met who delivered the news about the birth of Isaac. They also were the ones who later delivered the bad news about Sodom to Abraham prompting his pleas for mercy, perhaps because his relative Lot lived in Sodom. There is a sense in these stories that these visitors were angels and there are even references to "the Lord himself" visiting. This makes sense if we remember the purpose of the visit to Sodom: "*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done.....*" It was the Lord who heard the outcry against Sodom, perhaps from people in Sodom, and it was the Lord coming to check things out to see if "what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me."

Lot, in typical Near East custom, shows hospitality to these strangers, offering them a meal, refreshment and a place to stay, literally entertaining angels (Hebrews 13:2). What happens next may be familiar. The men of Sodom descended on Lot's house, demanding the visitors be brought outside so they could have sex with them. And perhaps our moral concern ends here because we probably hear this side of the story a lot.

But if we keep reading this narrative as we should, the story is not over. How does Lot respond? Lot said, "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them....." (Gen 19:6-8). Imagine this: "Here, take my daughters and do with them as you wish." And again we hear, "*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah, is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done.....*"

Lot was ready to give away his daughters as objects to secure the protection of the visitors, to secure his own protection (he had done okay in Sodom) and to buy favor with the men of the city. The offering of his daughters was to secure his own benefits and the benefits of the men of the town. They were offered as payment in place of something else. They were offered as commodities not sold but given away freely as objects to fulfill the sexual desires of others. What would compel Lot to do something like this? Why would Lot traffic his own daughters, not just selling them, but giving them away to sexual exploitation? And what do we do with this narrative in our sacred Scriptures? Why have we ignored this part of the story? "*The outcry against*

Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done.....”

What are the horrors, the wickedness of human trafficking? If we imagine where this text takes us, what would be the outcry of the Lord against the grievous sin and wickedness of trafficking humans as commodities on a market for the purposes and pleasures of others? The United Nations defines human trafficking as the “acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them.”

¹ Human trafficking is one of the most extreme forms of exploitation of the powerless. Lives are commodified, bought and sold, or traded, like consumer products to meet the needs of other persons. Human trafficking exploits persons made even more vulnerable by poverty, family abuse, gender inequality, limited job opportunities, civil war, immigration and displacement due to war and violence. These also should receive our moral attention and outrage. Human trafficking relies on the unbridled acceptance of global consumerism and global capitalism that enable “cheap goods,” yes, even people, to cross borders with as few barriers as possible. This should also receive our moral attention and outrage.

Worldwide, there are nearly two million children in the commercial sex trade. There are an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 children, women and men trafficked across international borders annually and the numbers may be even as high as two million.² The total market value of illicit human trafficking is estimated to be in excess of \$32 billion.³ According to the US Department of State, approximately 80 percent of human trafficking victims are women and girls, and up to 50 percent are minors who are bought and sold for sexual exploitation.⁴ In many parts of the world, women lack legal status, fundamental human rights, access to education, employment and opportunities to secure their own means of survival, thereby increasing their risk of not just being sold into prostitution by others but entering into prostitution as one of the few means available for economic survival. The human trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, like Lot’s daughters, assumes that they have less dignity, less worth, no voice, no names, and that they are even less than human. Their existence is valued for what they produce for others even as they are treated as products. *“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done.....”*

So, where do we start? Perhaps we start by hearing the outcry of those victimized and oppressed such as what the Lord heard. *“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah (and Lot?), is so great and his sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done.....”* The Lord went to Sodom, in the form of angels who were recognized as humans. The Lord did not hesitate to go to the place where sin and wickedness was the norm. Where might we go and

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where should we be in the places where humans are trafficked for the benefit and profit of others? In sweat shops? In places where we buy our own clothes? To street brothels? In rural communities in Ohio that depend on migrant labor? At the port of Toledo purported to be one of the most active ports in the human slave trade today?

Why might we ignore the second part of the story of Lot, the visitors, Sodom and Lot's daughters? Why might we be more outraged about the first part of the story and not the second, where Lot willingly offers his daughters up to sexual exploitation? "Here take my daughters and do with them what you like....." I'm sure that I don't have to convince you of the moral outrage of human trafficking as a fundamental of violation against persons and an offense to God. You know that it is not just wrong, but wicked. It is easy to see moral problems "out there." There is a common and unfortunate misperception that ethics is about correcting the bad behaviour of other persons. But this lets us off the hook. Ethics is about confronting our own practices, moral insensitivities and blind spots. What about our own ethical sensibilities? What is our moral complicity in this story? Why have we not seen this part of the story and the ways in which it is re-enacted everyday in the lives of girls and women? Why are we not outraged at the silence surrounding the giving of Lot's daughters over to sexual abuse and exploitation? What do we make of the fact that few people, including us, have expressed so little outrage at all of the grievous sins of Sodom and Lot's complicity in them?

Seeing and not believing is perhaps a spiritual problem, one with which I'm sure many of us have struggled. But seeing and not caring is a moral problem. We see the story....but do we care? "*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.*"

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/index.html>.

² <http://www.humantrafficking.org>.

³ <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008>.