

**Clackamas United Church of Christ**  
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**God Doesn't Smite Anyone: Sodom, Gomorrah, and the Nonviolent God of Jesus**

One of my favorite comic strips is Gary Larson's the "Far Side." He has one drawing called "God at His Computer."

Have any of you seen this? It's so ridiculous.

God is an old white man with long white hair and a beard. He is sitting up in heaven at his computer. The computer monitor shows him events happening on earth. God sees a man walking down a sidewalk next to an apartment complex. The people moving into an apartment have tied ropes around their piano in an effort to lift the piano up through their large windows. They lift the piano about 10 feet in the air when a man walks under the piano and then God hits the "smite button" on his keyboard.

Ouch.

It's funny, in part, because deep down we know that this depiction of a God who smites people is completely wrong. It's a total caricature of who God is.

And yet, there are similar depictions of God in the Bible. And like the depiction of God in the Gary Larson cartoon, those depictions in the Bible of a violent God who smites people are wrong.

Let me give you an example. There's a story in Genesis chapter 19 about two angels who travel to a town called Sodom. You have all heard the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. A man named Lot came to Sodom as a foreigner a few years prior to this event. Lot meets the angels and tells them to stay at his house for the night because the men of Sodom have been known to do some pretty nasty things to strangers.

The angels agree to stay at Lot's house, but just before they fall asleep for the night, all of the men of Sodom surround Lot's house and demand that they "know" the strangers.

Before we move on, I need to make an important point. This story has nothing to do with homosexuality as we know it. It has nothing to do with two men or two women living in a committed relationship based on love and care for one another. This story is about sexual abuse and power against vulnerable people, in this case strangers who were traveling to the land.

Now, throughout the story, Lot is described as something of an idiot. He's not very bright. Lot says to the men of Sodom, "Hey, instead of these men who just arrived to the city, I have some daughters. How about you take them."

All of the men in the story, including Lot, are despicable. The angels in the story respond to Lot's horrible suggestion with something better - they save the day by striking the men of Sodom blind so that they can't find the door.

The next morning, the angels told Lot and his family to leave as fast as they could because God was going to hit the smite button on his computer and destroy the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot and his family escaped, just before God rained down fire from heaven, destroying Sodom and Gomorrah.

Again, this story has nothing to do with homosexuality. We know that roughly 4-6 percent of the human population is gay or lesbian. So, about 96 percent of the men of Sodom were heterosexual. This story is about heterosexual men abusing strangers and immigrants. In fact, the men of the city become enraged when Lot tries to protect the strangers. They say, "This man Lot came to us as an alien, and now he is claiming to be judge over us! We will deal worse with him than with the strangers."

In the story, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah not because of homosexuality, but because of the way those towns treated people migrating from one place to another. God destroyed the cities because they refused to show hospitality to vulnerable strangers who were staying in their town.

Can you see any relevance in this story for our modern world?

Nearly every week, we see how horribly the Government of the United States is treating immigrants. This last week we saw pictures of a father and his daughter who left a horrific situation of gang violence and economic oppression in El Salvador as they sought the American dream here in the United States.

To make matters worse, our government claims to have stopped family separation, but in actuality it continues to separate children from family members. Any parent can be accused of being in a gang, or can be accused of a crime as small as a [traffic violation](#), and be separated from their child. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, and siblings who attempt to bring a child over are automatically separated from their child.

In addition, government policies called "metering" only allows for a small number of immigrants seeking asylum to have a hearing per week. This policy has led to 2,000 migrants waiting "[in conditions of hunger and overcrowding](#)" at ports of entry in areas where the temperature reaches over 110 degrees. [It can take months](#) before someone seeking asylum can even start the process, and after that it can take years for the process to conclude. Add to that the fact that many of the Mexican cities where immigrants have to wait have high crime and

kidnapping rates, and you begin to understand why someone would take desperate risks to cross the border.

When I look at the immigration situation in the United States, the way we treat strangers and hold children in horrible conditions at detention centers, I come to the conclusion that our nation is a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that they refused to show hospitality to strangers. In fact, those ancient towns were cruel to the strangers in their midst. The United States is like Sodom and Gomorrah because we abuse immigrant men, women, and children with cruel and intimidating “zero tolerance” policies in deliberate efforts to tell immigrants that they are not welcome here.

But maybe the US government has actually been worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. Because our government’s foreign policy in Central America has helped foster many of the problems that have led to mass migration.

I bring this up because I love the United States too much to be quiet about it. We can do and we can be so much better.

And friends, we have hope. Because our God is a God immigrants and strangers. Our spiritual ancestors Abraham and Sarah were immigrants. The Hebrew people immigrated from Egypt to Israel and God gave them this command: [You shall love the foreigner as you love yourself](#). If we really want to be a Christian nation, then we better love our neighbors, including our foreign neighbors, as we love ourselves.

Jesus sent his disciples throughout a foreign land called Samaria. He told them to go into the cities of Samaria to spread the Good News. One of the Samaritan towns refused to accept Jesus’ disciples. Like the towns of Sodom and Gamorrah, this Samaritan village refused to show Jesus’ disciples hospitality.

Two of Jesus’ disciples named James and John went to Jesus and asked, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Do you want us to smite the Samaritans?

James and John had the old story of Sodom and Gamorrah in mind. They thought that God destroyed Sodom and Gamorrah because the people there refused to show hospitality to strangers. And now the Samaritans were doing the same thing. Don’t the Samaritans deserve the same fate?

Did you notice what Jesus did? Jesus rebuked his own disciples. Our translation leaves out what Jesus said. There are ancient Gospels that have Jesus explain why he rebuked them. He said, “You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.”

The Gospels repeatedly tell us that Jesus reveals what God is really like. As bad as Sodom and Gomorrah were, God is not like the god depicted in Genesis 19. God is like Jesus. Jesus doesn't transform God from a violent God to a peaceful God. Rather, Jesus transforms the human understanding of God. At every point where the disciples ask Jesus to perform some act of violent smiting against their enemies, Jesus rebukes them.

But, honestly, I have a lot of sympathy for James and John. There are times when I want to say to God, "Hey, there are people over here acting like total jerks. Why don't you send some fire and brimstone upon them like you did with Sodom and Gomorrah?"

But God doesn't act that way. Instead, as we see in Christ, God sends us on a mission. Jesus resisted the temptation to respond to violence with violence. Jesus reveals a God who doesn't smite anyone, but a God who works for a more just world for all people through nonviolent action in the name of justice.

And here's the good news. There are people of faith and people of no faith working together to make the world a more hospitable place for immigrants. Here in Oregon we have an organization called the Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice, or IMIRJ. IMIRJ is composed of "People of faith in Oregon advancing state policies in support of immigrant and refugee justice."

I'm proud to tell you that our church has been involved with IMIRJ since it was founded in 2006. Especially in light of current events and the continued threats of mass deportation of immigrants from our Government officials in the next few weeks, there are many ways that we can actively support IMIRJ. If you are interested, please let me know.

But the most important thing you can do is simply this: be the alternative that Jesus calls us to be. Show hospitality to one another. Show hospitality to your neighbors. Say hello to them. Smile. Show hospitality to your spouse and coworkers. Show hospitality to your children. Sometimes, that's hard enough.

Yesterday my oldest child was in his room playing video games with some of his friends. They got really, really loud and obnoxious while I was working on this sermon. I got frustrated with them and I wanted to hit the smite button on my computer - while writing a sermon about not hitting the smite button! So I took a step back and, as calmly as I could, went into his room and asked them to quiet down a bit so I could concentrate. And I averted having to hit the smite button.

Just as important, please show hospitality to yourself. Life is hard and often stressful. I have hit the smite button more times than I'd like to admit and it only made things worse. I've had to forgive myself for it. Maybe you've hit the smite button a few times in your life. I want you to know that there is forgiveness. There is redemption. God is not against you. God is for you.

But the life of faith makes no promises about safety and security. In fact, Jesus called his disciples to take risks by becoming strangers in towns where their message of God's love for all people might be rejected. We may find rejection, even as we follow Jesus. But know this, God doesn't reject anyone. God doesn't reject you. God doesn't hit the smite button. God only has a love button and God continually presses that button. God loves all of us and calls us to love our neighbors, including our undocumented neighbors, as we love ourselves.

My friends, this is the Gospel message.

In God's realm, there is enough for everyone.

In God's realm, no one is dehumanized by being labeled "illegal."

In God's realm, every child, youth, and adult is embraced by God's love.

May we live into God's realm of love here on earth. Amen.