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Sodom, homosexuality, drone strikes and prayer

by Thomas Reese

NCR Today

Last Sunday, I preached in San Francisco on prayer. I think that was a good pastoral decision. People said they liked the homily, but I keep wondering if perhaps it was just a cop-out to avoid more controversial topics.

To understand my dilemma, you have to remember that the first reading was from Genesis 18, where Abraham argues with God over the destruction of Sodom. The reading led me to think about preaching on homosexuality for about a nanosecond. I did not think I had anything new or interesting to say. Plus there is probably not a person in San Francisco who has not made up his or her mind on this topic. Oh, yes, did I mention that the pastor who said something nice about homosexuals last month was raked over the coals in the blogosphere and reported to the archbishop?

Then there is the scholarly debate over whether the sin of Sodom was sexual or whether it was a sin against hospitality to strangers. Abraham and Sarah had recently shown hospitality to three strangers and were rewarded with a pregnancy. The same three men go to Sodom, where they are welcomed by Lot and his family, but the locals want to have sex with them. When Lot tries to protect his guests, the crowd turns on him because he is not a real citizen but a "resident alien." Lot's guests end up saving him by pulling him into the house and closing the door.

Lot is so protective of his three male guests that he offers the mob his two virgin daughters instead. You don't have to be a feminist to think that offering your daughters to a mob to be gang-raped is a horrible idea. Later, these same daughters get their father drunk and have sex with him to "ensure posterity by our father." Maybe I should have preached on the corrupting effect of patriarchal culture.

In any case, on the topic of homosexuality, I could not have said it better than Pope Francis did on the plane on his way back to Rome from Rio de Janeiro. When asked about the "gay lobby" in the Vatican, he

responded:

"When I meet a gay person, I have to distinguish between their being gay and being part of a lobby. If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them? They shouldn't be marginalized. The tendency [to homosexuality] is not the problem ... they're our brothers."

Since gay priests have been falsely blamed for the sexual abuse crisis, the pope's statement is very significant. In 2005, the Vatican issued a document saying men with deep-rooted homosexual tendencies should not be ordained or allowed in the seminary. Most interpreted this to mean that someone with a homosexual orientation could not be a priest even if he were celibate.

Pope Francis made clear that being gay is not an impediment for ordination. For him, the issue is not orientation but whether a person is a good priest. Even if a priest fails in celibacy, one can "then convert, and the Lord both forgives and forgets. We don't have the right to refuse to forget." The pope made it clear that there is no room for homophobia either in the church or society. But if I had said what he said 24 hours before he said it, I would have been reported to the archbishop.

Actually, when I read Genesis 18, my thoughts turned from sex to the war on terrorism. Until recently, the Obama administration has been using scores of drones to go after terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other parts of the world. It is still launching drone strikes but in fewer numbers.

The dialogue between Abraham and God sounded like a conversation that should take place in the war room when planning a drone strike. How many civilian casualties are acceptable when going after terrorists?

One of the principles of the just war theory is that civilians should be immune from direct attack, which is why most moralists judged the use of atomic weapons and carpet bombing during World War II to be immoral. But the just war theory also recognized that civilians inevitably die in wars. The military speaks of collateral damage, which is an antiseptic way of describing civilian casualties. The Pentagon no longer counts civilian casualties because of the negative reaction to the high number of civilian deaths in Vietnam.

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In Genesis 18, Abraham sounds like an ethicist arguing against civilian casualties.

"Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were 50 righteous people in the city; would you really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people within it?" Each time Abraham wins the argument with God, he pushes for a lower figure until he gets God to agree that he would not destroy the city if there were 10 innocents.

Is the lesson here that God would want us to spare a city full of terrorists for the sake of 10 innocents? If you take that position, forget drones. Is someone in the war room making Abraham's case? Secrecy prevents us from knowing. Information on the drone attacks must be declassified along with the numbers on civilian casualties so we as a nation can join Abraham and God in this discussion.

When I thought about how little impact my congregation could have on U.S. drone policy, I punted. Thus, I struck homosexuals and drones as topics for my sermon and talked about prayer. Was I a coward or pastoral? I don't know, but Francis appears to be encouraging me to be braver and risk making mistakes.

Follow Reese on Twitter: [@ThomasReeseSJ](#). His email is reesesj@NCRonline.org.

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