**“Social Truth”** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Luke 11:1-13 Saint Paul, Minnesota
July 27, 2025

On my recent combination education and vacation time, I went to the Victoria and Albert museum for a special Cartier exhibit. The company was begun by Louis Francois Cartier in 1847. His son Alfred continued the business and in the late 1890s, Alfred’s sons—Louis, Pierre, and Jacques, at ages 18, 15, and 9 years old, “carefully split the map of the world into three key regions: Europe, the Americas and Great Britain. Louis assigned one area to each brother and then they pledged to one another ‘to create Le Maison Cartier’.

The show itself began with the incredibly beautiful Manchester tiara.

That was followed by a six-foot case that held a variety of diamond baubles designed for Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt and Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, and then we were led on a trip around the world. First to Egypt where the discovery of King Tut’s tomb in 1922 created the desire for jewelry based on newly discovered ancient Egyptian designs. We then went to India, where, still under British rule, the maharajas adopted some western design while Cartier added Indian technique. Then to Japan where they preferred diamond jewelry in the shape of flora and fauna and where Cartier added jade. Then to China where there were pieces from mythology such as dragons in addition to Chinese symbols; in China Cartier incorporated lacquer and learned to carve the jade. Then to the Romanovs in Russia where they met Carl Faberge who would be a retail competitor throughout his life.

 The next part of the show included drawings; information on their design process; and some of the final products including pieces from the Queen Mother, Princess Margaret, Queen Elizabeth, and Princess Anne. They had one whole room showing the sketches and the evolution of their panther design, as well as a video that showed the amount of work and expertise that goes into creating one. The very first leopard ever made was for Wallis Simpson. They also had a case with examples of their multicolored carved emerald, ruby, and sapphire pieces that became known as Tutti Frutti. There was one room dedicated to the Tank watch and the final room had six round towers, each filled with three to five tiaras, including one which mimicked Napolean’s laurel crown that was designed Princess Marie Bonaparte for her wedding to Prince George of Greece in 1907.  ‘

The whole thing was dazzling …. And by the end, quite overwhelming.

In retrospect, it reminded me of some of the history of the last century; not a strict history but perhaps a symbolic one, starting with World War I (1914-18); then, moving on to fall of the Romanovs (1917); King Edward VIII’s abdication (1936); a second World War (1939-45); the end of British Rule in India (1947); the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (1953); Grace Kelly’s marriage to Prince Rainier of Monaco (1956); Camelot/Jackie and JFK (1961-63); Nixon’s visit to China (1972); Reagan’s image of “shining city on a hill” (Kennedy 1961, Reagan 1980-89); the Space Race (1955-75); and fall of the Berlin Wall (1989). These are some of the events came to mind as I walked through this historical geography.

But, as I put this into writing, I realized there are some things missing from the Cartier walk: the Great Depression (1929-39); the rise of Stalin (1924-53), and Lenin (1917-1924); the Holocaust (1933-45);  Nagasaki and Hiroshima (1945); the Korean Conflict (1950-53); the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962); the Reverand Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.’s Civil Rights Movement  (1957-68); the Vietnam War (1955-75); Reagan’s “welfare queen” speech (1976);  Iran hostages (1979-81); and the Cold War (1947-91).

So, to be honest, I wanted to preach from Luke and the Psalms but I couldn’t get any traction in my thought process. I briefly considered just distributing the sermon I preached on this text three years ago, we could have had a discussion. Finally I did what the Spirit has been nagging me todo and swapped the Psalm for the Genesis text; I thought it would be background. But it’s not the background, it’s where we are. Where we’ve always been?

God called Abram and Sarai to leave Haran; in today’s reading we find them living comfortably in Mamre. His nephew Lot traveled along with Abram but he veered in the direction of Sodom because, for him, the lush greenery was reminiscent of the garden of Eden. This passage comes in the midst of a much longer Abraham story. There are stories of angel visits to both Abram and Lot; there is the birth of Ishmael, there is the story Lot’s experience with a mob that surrounded his home as he was trying to provide hospitality for these angel/foreigners. It is a glimpse of the men of Sodom acting on suspicion and bullying of outsiders. It is really without much explanation the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah become notorious, for their wickedness. And that wickedness carries the aura of orgies and debauchery.

 However, Walter Brueggemann has dissected the Hebrew vocabulary and meaning in Genesis chapters 17 and 18 and yes, there is reference to sexuality as in, “Adam ‘knew’ his wife and they conceive a child.” But there are many, many more instances of “knowing’ to mean awareness of an event or an outcome. The wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah is not sex or sexual preference. And in trying to find out what defined that wickedness, and I can’t believe I wrote this on this particular week, but there is no list. There is only what God knows. Think about that. There is no comprehensive list defining sin, there is only what God knows because God knows the human heart.

We've heard a lot this week about Jeffrey Epstein. Most sex trafficking is not so glamorous as to include private jets and private islands. And even so, it's still ugly and atrocious. We have heard in recent years that Highway 35 is a major route for sex trafficking. There are two organizations who are working to bring to our attention to the murdered and missing indigenous women known among their tribes as the “Stolen Sisters. Prostitution is so mainstream as a big business that the World Bank has been connected to some of the income from it. In the absence of sufficient economic opportunities, some individuals and especially women and girls are very vulnerable to exploitation and sex trafficking. These are the victims and blaming the victims has too long deflected our eyes from the cruelty and control imposed by the users; the sociopathic pleasure seekers; and those who do anything for power and money.

Sexuality and homosexuality get an undeserved judgment by association with Sodom and Gomorrah. It is a distraction. There isn’t a wickedness list but Ezekiel 16:49 says this, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy.” As one commentator wrote, there is a “radical free will nature of what it means for God to be God.” When I see the violence, starvation, and trauma in the world today, I have an appreciation for that radical free will for the holy impulse to take it all down. Yet, we can also have an appreciation for the case Abram made for the salvation of the righteous who live among the unrighteous. Yet to be in right relationship is not about perfection but of constant practice.

 Princess Elizabeth received the Williamson stone, a 54.5 carat uncut pink diamond, as a wedding gift. The stone was mined in Tanganyika from a mine owned by Canadian geologist John Williamson. She had the diamond cut and set in a brooch by Cartier the year of her coronation. The Queen served her country and the Commonwealth for decades. She was a steadying presence in the world and lived from a deeply ingrained sense of duty and faith. I admired her.

 According to the V&A museum’s information, the Manchester tiara was “commissioned in 1903 by the Dowager Duchess of Manchester who supplied 1,513 diamonds for a design inspired by 18th-century French architecture and ironwork. Born in New York to wealthy American-Cuban parents, the Duchess was one of the many ‘dollar princesses’ who married into the British aristocracy, exchanging their wealth for a title.” And again, noted by the museum, just a little over 100 years later, the tiara “was accepted by HER MAJESTY’S Government in lieu of Inheritance Tax and allocated to the Victoria and Albert Museum.” Prosperous ease does not necessarily last. Her majesty’s government receiving the tiara triggered a reminder of the great privilege and wealth of the monarchy along with its ties to colonialism.

Diana Butler Bass wrote this morning “Sin is when the circle of abundance is abused–and when we see ‘gifts’ as something we have earned, own, and can make others earn–and we set up a system of indebtedness whereby we enrich ourselves and control others” (Sunday Musings, July 27, 2025). This is a constant concern of the faithful.

 Matthew Sheppard’s murder should never have happened and when it did it should have been a turning point. George Floyd’s murder should never have happened and when it did it appeared to be a turning point. Trafficking women and girls and prostitution as organized, big business is an inhumane wickedness that rarely punishes the users. So, they say, look over here and then malign LGBTQ+ expressions of life and love because that nurtures human prejudice and allows transformation to dead end.

So what do we do with this inner Sodom and Gomorrah? With this long-entrenched wickedness that glitters and thrives in this world?

Luke suggests, we live the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

We claim God as our own, our Creator, and we hallow God, and only God.

We do not hallow our own idols and we learn to tell the difference.

We pray everyday for emotional and communal growth toward God's Kin-dom.

We pray everyday that we are able to follow God's will and not our own.

We pray that everyone around us has enough to eat each day and then we do what we can to help make that happen.

We give and receive forgiveness.; it is the Lord alone who says, “Vengeance is mine.”

When we feel temptation, we ask for a way out.

And when we see evil, we name it out loud so we are not complicit in hiding it. For the sake of our own soul, we move in the opposite direction from evil unless the innocent are enveloped in it. If that is the case, we work as a community to bring love, compassion, and truth to expose and heal it; which is also what we pray, for the arrival of God’s Kin-dom, God’s power, and God’s glory.

For all of this we pray,

Amen.