Friends, I have to admit it: I really struggled to write this sermon. I was absolutely fighting myself on it. In my head, I want to deliver the kind of scathing political commentary that incites people to bold action and shapes the world into a better place. But in my heart, knowing that this is the last time this summer that I will address all of you lovely people from the pulpit and get a chance to publicly declare how much y'all mean to me, I want to write you a love letter. Which doesn't seem quite as politically relevant.

But you know, perhaps in a world that seems bent on hating itself into the ground, maybe a love letter is its own kind of revolution. And especially given all the hatred that has arisen from today's lectionary reading, I want to remind you all of how much hope I draw from this very congregation. So here we go.

Dear Dickey Memorial,
When I first walked in on a Sunday morning, I was afraid. And that's not an easy thing for me to admit. Normally, I take a huge amount of pride in my willingness to go anywhere; to try anything; to close my eyes, cross my fingers, and throw myself into the unknown. In fact, when I was a kid my own mother once described me as, and I quote, "worryingly fearless, and yet easily confused."

But do you want to know one of the things that absolutely terrifies me?

The classic biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Or, as I like to call it:

Sodom and McFreaking Gomorrah.

I find a hint of levity lessens my sense of existential dread.

So when I checked out the lectionary passage for today, and saw that our friend the prophet Isaiah decided to open his speech by referring to his listeners as "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah," I was, to put it mildly, a little freaked out.

To explain why, we're going to need to backtrack. See, Sodom and Gomorrah were these two biblical cities that were known for being horrible, evil places full of sinful and awful people. And the book of Genesis describes how God became so fed up with the people that God decided to utterly destroy them. I'm talking cities burned to the ground, full-on fire and brimstone; the kind that still gets talked about and put on surprisingly aggressive church signs thousands of years later. God was royally hacked off, and was not shy about making that well-known. It's the archetypal biblical tale of hellfire and destruction that, quite frankly, makes me want to shove my fingers in my ears and recite Psalm 23 over and over until the threat of divine retribution wears off.

So then, clearly not the happiest of tales. But then the question becomes, why would Isaiah even bring it up anyway? To be honest, it's kind of a downer.

But let's remember that Isaiah is speaking to the primarily Jewish people of Jerusalem, who all would have known the story of Sodom and Gomorrah like the back of their hands. They would have grown up hearing about these cities were so sinful that they had to be razed to the ground, and they would have known exactly what Isaiah meant when he called them people of Gomorrah. In just that one line, Isaiah would have reminded them that they were broken people living in a broken world. And not only that, he would have implied that they had better shape up or ship out, because unless some major changes happened, the thunderbolts were on the way.

Side note: I'd bet good money that nobody ever accused biblical prophets of pulling their punches.

This stuff scares me. And it scares me even more to think about how this passage has been used. As I'm sure many of you know, some of our fellow Christians like to claim that the reason God was so incredibly upset with Sodom and Gomorrah was because those cities were too gay. And you know, as I've gotten older, I've realized that not only is this interpretation oppressive and damaging and downright stupid, it just doesn't make any sense! I mean, let's just think about this one. If queer folks actually had the ability to get entire cities smited, don't you think we would have used that as a negotiating tactic by now? We could have had marriage equality way before 2015, that's all I'm saying.

I've spent my entire life up to this point making excuses for this kind of thing; trying to convince myself that the people who blame Sodom and Gomorrah on gay people are just confused. Or they're reading the wrong translation, or they were raised in a church that taught them to be hateful, or they had just never met an openly queer person or would eventually change their ways. But, friends, it's not that complicated. It's scapegoating, pure and simple.

People read this passage and, like me, they got scared. They looked around them and saw a society just as broken as Isaiah's Jerusalem, and just as broken as Sodom and Gomorrah, and they became afraid. They became afraid of God's wrath, and of their own wrongdoing, and of the idea that if they were part of a broken society and complicit in evil, then at some point they might actually have to do something about it. So the easiest thing was to look around and decide that the whole thing was somebody else's fault.

See, we have this idea that when we feel threatened by something, the easiest thing to do is to just shut it out. Instead of actually addressing the issues at hand, it's much easier to find a convenient scapegoat, who is typically a member of a marginalized community. We convince ourselves that if we can just get rid of everyone we deem to be a problem, and keep ourselves in strictly controlled isolation with people who look and think like us, then everything will be fine. There's this ridiculous, and yet horribly pervasive idea that by excluding those we see as dangerous, we can keep ourselves safe.

Friends, this is how cults get started.

And this kind of rhetoric is exhaustingly common. Our media is saturated with it. Just look at how our country has chosen to blame so many of our issues on immigrants, and used that as an excuse to persecute and exclude our neighbors. Or look at how our justice system unfairly targets young men of color, blaming our fellow human beings for crime and violence while ultimately failing to examine the evils of racism, as well as the cycles of poverty and oppression that are so pervasive in our society. Even right here in Baltimore, certain neighborhoods feared social change and decided to form what they called covenanted communities, consciously excluding their neighbors in order to preserve an unjust status quo. And I've even heard it argued that all of our country's problems stem from the South, and that if the North split off from the South then the Northern US would become a beautiful and shining utopia free of racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice. Which, as a Southerner myself, really just puts a bee in my bonnet.

Sodom and McFreaking Gomorrah, friends.

The whole premise of scapegoating is that some of us are guiltier than others, and that we can get rid of all of our problems by excluding whatever people we decide to blame. But if we turn back to the Isaiah passage, we find that Isaiah really isn't letting anybody off the hook! In calling the entire city of Jerusalem rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah, he is not blaming any one group of people (which is kind of a requirement for scapegoating). He's not pointing to the gang of teenagers off to the left and saying "you guys are awful, shape up or the whole city's gonna burn." He's not admonishing the prisoners in the local jail, telling them that they better repent or they'll get smited. And he's definitely not picking out a marginalized group and excluding them to make himself feel safe, or to absolve himself of guilt.

No, he's speaking to all of us. Apparently, we are all the people of Sodom and McFreaking Gomorrah. We are all part of the oppressive systems that make up our broken and hurting world. And if we are all part of the problem, it means we need to stop excluding and rejecting our fellow human beings in a misguided attempt to protect ourselves.

And if we are all part of the problem; if we are all the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah, it means that we are all equal. It means that we need to stop blaming each other for all of the problems we see around us, and we need to stop blaming ourselves. And if all of us are part of the system, that means we are capable of influencing the system. And if we are capable of influencing the system, then that means that we are powerful. And, throughout this passage, we hear the voice of a God who wants us to treat one another fairly, because we are so incredibly loved. And so if we are equal, and we are powerful, and we are loved, then what can't we do? I mean, sure, we are all broken people in a broken society, but we are equal and powerful and loved, my friends. Because if Isaiah is telling us that we have been part of building these unjust systems, can't we be a part of tearing them down?

But then, here comes the big question. How exactly do we do that?

To answer it, we have to think about how scapegoating operates: by preying on our divisions and our fears of one another, and our fears of difference. And so to avoid scapegoating, we must learn that, in times of fear and uncertainty and brokenness, we must lean in to our communities instead of destroying them. We must support one another, and not just our immediate neighbors; but those who we are inclined to blame for our problems! In the simplest terms possible, we must learn to be kind to one another.

And I know that kindness feels like a cop-out; like an easy, Sunday-School approved message. You know the type, where cartoon animals tell you to just share your snacks and all the evil in the world will disappear. But it does not seem so easy, or so simple, when we think about the absolutely ridiculous amount of courage it takes to be really and truly kind.

I mean, we have already established how much easier it is to blame someone else for our problems instead of recognizing and acting against our own complicitness in oppressive systems. And we live in a world that seems like it wants us to hate and fear one another. So let's just think about how incredibly brave do you have to be to stare your fear in the face, feel the temptation to cast blame on someone else, and choose, instead, to take reaponsibikity? To choose, instead, to be kind?

We tend to think of kindness as a form of weakness, as though kindness means just keeping your head down and letting other people speak first. But kindness, when done right, is not only the ultimate mark of courage, but it is a radical act of revolution. This is the kindness that changes the course of history. This is the kindness that speaks truth to power; that refuses to abide by oppressive legal systems; that rebels against injustice and inequality worldwide.

And friends, while I have been here and have had the immense honor and privilege of seeing Dickey Memorial at its finest. And I don't say that blindly. I've seen all of the flaws, too- I mean, I've even been in the boiler room- but I have also witnessed immense kindness. I have seen congregation members share stories of pain in their lives, and instead of being rejected, we chose to provide care. When confronted with the threat of ICE raids, we chose to become a sanctuary congregation. When we heard of a drive-by shooting, we examined the systems of poverty and oppression that could have caused such a tragedy. When faced with multiple mass shootings in a weekend, we did not hide in our homes, but rather came here, worshipped as a community, and cried out to God! When someone is moving, we carry couches in the rain. When local youth need a safe place to learn and grow, we start an after school program. When people are hungry, we cook. And when a hapless intern is confused and afraid, we provide welcome.

Friends, this is a love letter, so you'll have to forgive me for getting personal for just a moment. I have already told you that when I came here, I was afraid. But instead of being rejected, I was

welcomed. I walked in on my first Sunday with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah rolling around in my mind, and I wasn't sure if any church could ever fully accept a queer person. You looked me straight in the eye and complimented my outfit. I came in certain that no musical group would ever want somebody who's mostly deaf. I was almost immediately recruited for handbells. I came in knowing that I couldn't seem like too much of a redneck, or people would assume I was ignorant. But when my accent slipped out one morning, you chuckled and told me to be myself. And I want to take a moment to say thank you, both for the kindness you have shown me and the kindness you have taught me to show.

This is the kindness that breaks down walls and builds up communities. This is the kindness that binds us together. This is the kindness that marks us not only as the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah, but as the beloved people of God. Both at the same time, my friends. We are a walking contradiction, and we are beautiful.

And if I can get personal for just one more moment, let me tell you that I am dreading saying goodbye to all of you in a week. And I am certain that I will leave a big chunk of my heart behind; maybe buried out in the memorial garden or stashed in a supply closet somewhere. But, honestly, I'm okay with that. Because it's like my middle school best friends and I told each other after a sleepover when we didn't want to go home: when you leave somewhere special, it's best to leave something behind, whether it's a toothbrush or a piece of your heart. Because then, sooner or later, you'll have to come back to get it.

Love,
Grace (the best intern ever)