

22nd Sunday After Pentecost

October 21, 2018

Series: We Are One

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1 Corinthians 12:12-13a; 22b-27

2 Samuel 13:1-30

#NoMore!

As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be one of the scoundrels of Israel. – 2 Samuel 13:13

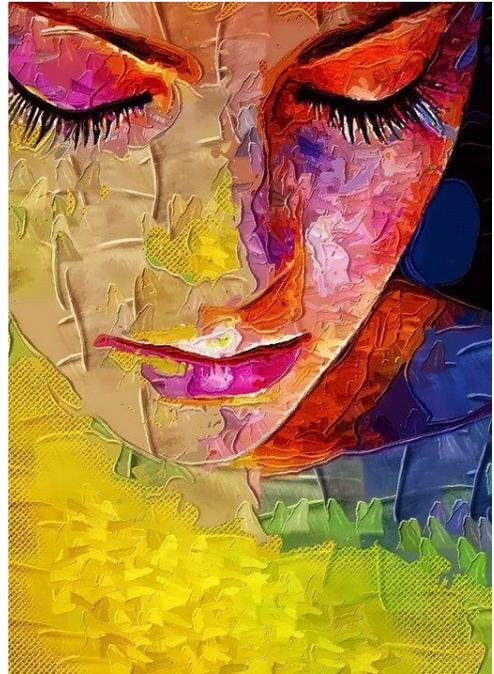
There are some stories in the Bible that ought to break our hearts. They are stories of hurt and humiliation, stories of God's plan for human relationships gone terribly wrong. It starts early in Genesis: Cain kills Abel...Sarah casts out surrogate mother Hagar and her child...Joseph's jealous brothers sell him into slavery...then Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of sexual assault.

No story is more tragic than the one about King David's children: Amnon, Absalom and Tamar. It's about sexual violence, and its aftermath. I don't think I have ever preached on this passage, and I wouldn't be doing it now, but for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has refused to leave me alone about this. It's a topic that has dominated our news for many months (actually years) now. Here at Woods we do not shy away from difficult topics

The Bible has a great deal to say on this topic, but it's very hard to preach about.

At the same time I know this is a trigger topic for some of you. Perhaps you or someone you love has experienced this kind of trauma. It is estimated that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men has experienced sexual abuse or assault.¹ That number is staggering. What that means is that all of us have been impacted in some way. As a pastor I hear the cries of people who are living with these terrible memories. I hear the anguish and shame they experience. I hear the self-doubt, and it is heartbreaking. Just a few days ago I learned that a friend's father, a respected Presbyterian pastor, is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. The trauma took place more than 50 years ago. Only recently has he found the words to speak of it. Now the healing can begin.

Today it may be too hard for you to hear me speak of this. Or you may think that the subject is inappropriate for little ears. If you want to go walk the labyrinth for the next twenty minutes, or



enjoy a cup of Fair Trade coffee in Fellowship Hall, I understand...we all understand. That's what I'd like to do too. But I can't because #metoo needs to become #NoMore!

Abuse is a scourge upon this land. A national news outlet reported that at RAINN, the most recognized national helpline for those who are experiencing or have experienced sexual abuse, calls have increased 200% in the last part of this year.ⁱⁱ I grieve over what has happened, though I am glad that so many people like my friend's father, are now able to say out loud what has happened to them. These conversations are happening. A lot of the time they are happening online, on social media. But we can't, we shouldn't leave it there. My hope, and my fervent prayer is that by bringing this out into the light, supporting each other as the family of resurrection faith, Christ's light, we will find healing, help, and new hope.

So let's pray together.

God of all good, we come to you aware that you are making all things new. There is a new earth just over the horizon, a world where all people are equal, where the strong no longer oppress the weak, where brothers and sisters thrive together in unity. We are a long way from that new world, God. So we pray that you will come by here. Come quickly and help us. This world you so love, it's a mess. There is oppression, violence, and injustice. And so we cry out to you. Come by here, Lord. Come and reorder this world. Renew this world after the image of your son, Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen

It is a hard story to hear. It's a story about generational sin in a dysfunctional family. (Aren't they all?) This is not just any family, but THE royal family of Israel. Someone at Bible study on Wednesday said that this text from 2 Samuel "sounds like a soap opera" or an episode of *Law & Order: SVU*. It's troubling that we consider this sort of thing entertainment, but when we try to discuss it together, we get squeamish...feeling like it's an inappropriate topic. Far too often we do what King David did. We get angry, but do nothing. Survivors have been told that they should get over it, forget about what happened to them, that they should move on with their lives. But how can they? When I worked as a hospital chaplain I was often with women who had been abused. Every one of them, to a person, said what they most needed was to be heard, and believed.

So let's listen to Tamar. She is the daughter of the king. This is her story, and the story of her father, David and her brothers, Amnon and Absalom. Rather than reading the whole story to you, all 39 verses, I'm going to tell it, and you can follow along with me on the screen, if you want to do that.

David was a man after God's own heart...David the shepherd boy, chosen by YHWH to lead Israel...anointed king by the prophet Samuel, David became Israel's greatest leader. But David had some bad stuff going on in his family. That's an important lesson for us. You can have a great public presence, but if your own family is in trouble, nothing is right. Amnon, David's oldest son, was about to tear the family to pieces.

He thought he was in love with his half-sister Tamar.

The text says he “loved” her, but it wasn’t love Amnon felt for Tamar. The truth is Amnon knew very little about love. Love always seeks the good of another person. *“Love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant, or boastful or rude. Love does not insist upon its own way.”*ⁱⁱⁱ Amnon could only think about himself and about getting what he wanted.

Tamar became his obsession. He was tormented by his desire for her. So Amnon and a friend hatched a plot to get her into his house. He pretended to be ill and convinced his father to send his half-sister to care for him.

Tamar, unlike her conniving half-brother, knew about love. She did as her father asked. She went to her brother’s house wearing the robe of a princess, with long, elegant sleeves that identified her as one of the virgin daughters of the king. Even so she didn’t hesitate to get her hands dirty caring for her brother. He was waiting for her. When she was very close, he sent everyone out of the room, seized her and raped her. Then he hated her. He threw her out of his house like a piece of trash, and bolted the door behind her.

What happens next is equally as awful. The two people, two very powerful people, who could have been her advocates, let her down. Her full brother Absalom tells her not to take it to heart. He tells her not to say anything to anyone, but she can’t be silent. Her whole life has been turned upside down. When her father, David discovers what has happened, *“He became very angry but would not punish Amnon because he loved him.”*^{iv}

The two people who should have helped her, loved ones who should have supported Tamar, did nothing. Absalom told her to keep her secret, but she could not. As a woman in the ancient Middle East she was not allowed to speak her truth. Nevertheless she made it known. She tore the sleeves from the royal robe and put ashes on her head, ashes of mourning...ashes like Job. She became a desolate woman. Of course she did. She was grieving the loss of her innocence, the loss of her dream.

We don’t know what happened to Tamar after that. I can imagine her using the words of Job, *“Even though I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, because I am full of shame and drowned in my affliction.”*^v This is how many survivors feel, carrying the bitter memories sometimes for seventy or eighty years. Some question themselves – asking, is there something I could have done to keep this from happening to me? Some say nothing because they think no one will believe them, or, like Tamar, because people they trust betray them. Far too often the church has been part of that conspiracy of silence.

I have heard terrible stories from women who have been counseled by their pastors to go back and submit to their abusive husbands, and from children who were told to be silent because the Bible says the husband is the head of his wife, and the children are supposed to obey their parents. Listen: that is a false and inaccurate reading of Ephesians 5. And it is dangerous. You

may have a loved one today who is part of a church that teaches this brand of complementarian theology -- you can tell which churches these are because they will have no women priests or pastors...no women elders or teachers of men and boys – *you* must warn them, gently, of course in a non-judgmental way, but clearly, warn them that this kind of thinking leaves families, churches and communities ripe for sexual misconduct and abuse. People who have wielded inappropriate power over others for too long will make excuses. They will tell you that the Bible says that women should not exercise authority over men, or...Eve ate the apple, so women are the reason there is sin in the world. That is still part of the doctrine of a certain Protestant denomination I know. Listen, the Bible says a lot of things that are hard to understand, but this one is easy: Jesus Christ is our one and only head. We are all equal in his sight. No person is to dominate another. In Jesus Christ there is neither “*Jew no Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus.*”^{vi}

Tamar’s story makes the consequences of inequality tragically clear. Sometimes I’ve been accused of being super-Presbyterian. *This* is why. Presbyterians are egalitarians. Our Presbyterian ancestors invented democracy. We believe that all people are equal and that no person should have excessive power over another. We are one.

Tamar’s story also teaches us that sexual violence and abuse have nothing to do with love or even lust. It is all about power. Abuse is the misuse of power. All forms of abuse are rooted in issues of power and control.

To the millions of survivors of childhood abuse I want to say that God knows your heart and the terror you have experienced. At some point you must surely have wondered why God did not intervene to stop the abuse. I wish I had an answer for that. I have learned something though, that we have all learned the healing power of the truth. In 2016 Rachael Denhollander came forward and became the first person to testify against USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. So many times since then, the nation and the world has discovered a bit more about what Jesus meant when he said, “*the truth will set you free.*”^{vii}

If you or someone you love is a survivor, hear this: On this day, in this sacred space, “we acknowledge the violence done to you. We drag it out into the light to reveal it as the sin it was and is; the horror it was and is; the evil act it was and is.”^{viii}

#Metoo is a start, but it is not enough. We need to say #NoMore! It is time for the Church, capital “C”, the Church of Jesus Christ, to step up and say No More! Will some of God’s children be allowed to exercise toxic authority over others? No More! “We are one body with many members...if one member suffers, all suffer together.” No More hiding. Absalom may have said, “Hide your shame,” but Jesus said, “*The truth will set you free.*” If you or someone you know needs a trained counselor, we have them. These are very personal matters, and no one should pressure you to speak of them before you are ready...it’s your life...your time. Because we know this impacts so many, we have opened the Counseling Center this morning. One of our

Stephen ministers will be present to listen, if you would like. There are also referral resources at the information booth for you to take.

At the end of “A Farewell to Arms,” Hemingway says, “The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong in the broken places.” I often think of that when I hear the stories of courage of people like Rachel Denhollander, or Tamar, or my friend’s father. There are so many others. Just like Tamar, our Lord came as a servant. He was betrayed and abused by the ones he came to serve. He also was beaten, thrown out like the trash, and left to suffer on the cross.

The Bible gives special attention to the shame that was heaped on him. He felt the weight of it. Every survivor knows that weight, though it is entirely undeserved. Think of Tamar with ashes in her hair. Now remember the words of Jesus’ first sermon, the one he preached in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because God has anointed me to bring good news...
Release to the captives...
To let the oppressed go free.”^{ix}*

We are not there yet, but we are getting closer. The church, Christ’s body on earth, is committed to helping lift the burden of those who have suffered. Earlier I mentioned a pastor friend whose father is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. She wrote this for him. Listen:

“Little boy inside the old man, little girl inside the old woman, teenager, young adult, middle-aged companion: all of you – welcome home, child of God. Welcome home. You no longer have to live on the edge of hope. You can be soaked in the light of the gospel. You are never again alone... You belong to an Easter [people], and Easter is rising in you, even here, and even now.”^x

To God be the glory!

ⁱ Holly Yan, “The National Sexual Assault Hotline got a 201% increase in calls during the Kavanaugh hearing” *CNN*

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 13: 4-5

^{iv} 2 Samuel 13:21

^v Job 10:15

^{vi} Galatians 3:28

^{vii} John 8:32

^{viii} Shannon J. Kershner, from a sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, September 30, 2018

^{ix} Luke 4:18-19

^x Kershner, *op.cit.*