



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Ashes on Her Head

Matthew 5:14-16; 2 Samuel 13:1-22

November 11, 2018 – 25th Sunday after Pentecost

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I've always loved family stories. As a young child, I'd pepper my parents with questions. I wanted to know about my dad's childhood in Scotland, and my mom's mother, whom I'd never met. The story of my grandmother's childhood always made me really sad. Born in 1898, she adored her father. Every day, she would walk to edge of the lawn and wait for him to return from his work in the coalmines. I often imagine this little girl waiting with expectation and excitement for him on Christmas Eve 1902, a day on which he never arrived. The mine where he worked had exploded and he and many others died. This left my great grandmother suddenly and completely alone with children who needed to be fed and clothed and housed. Shocking as this might be to our modern sensibilities, women of that time could not own property and were incredibly vulnerable without the protective and financial support of a husband, so my great grandmother quickly married a widower who was an itinerant preacher with a bunch of kids of his own. Because there were so many mouths to feed, my great grandmother gave my grandmother up for legal adoption to her deceased husband's parents. My great-great grandparents were barely surviving themselves on a meager Civil War pension, but they were grateful to have a part of their deceased son in the form of my grandmother. My mom always told me that my grandmother had one dress for school, and every night my great-great grandmother laundered it and ironed it, so that while they could not change being poor, they would send their girl to school looking clean and smart. This is the part of the story when my sense of justice would flare up as a kid. How could my grandmother's mother give her up? And that's how I felt for most of my life, until about six years ago when I was talking on the phone with my Aunt Glenna. Somehow, the story of my grandmother's adoption came up, and I

expressed the same dismay and sadness as always. Taking me quite by surprise, my aunt said, “That’s not the whole story.” Of course, I asked her to tell me what she meant. She explained that when she was a teenager, she had been taking a nap on the sofa in the living room. Her mother’s older sister came to visit and play cards, as she often did. They sat in the sunroom playing cards and talking, not aware that my aunt was half asleep and could hear their conversation. Their chatting turned to childhood, and they talked about their mother who, it turns out, had deeply grieved giving up my grandmother, but she had done it to protect her from the sexual abuse that her new husband, the itinerant preacher, had been doling out to the oldest daughter. My great grandmother feared my grandmother would be next. Given the need for protection and support from a man in those times, my great grandmother could not leave this man who was raping her daughter, but she could find a way to get one of them out of the house and protected by her grandparents.

I did not know this family story in its fullness when I first encountered the story from second Samuel as a seminary student in a preaching class with an assignment to preach on a “difficult text”. A story so appalling and hard to digest that I cried again reading it in preparation for this sermon. Had you heard about Tamar before today? As I suggested prior to reading the scripture, this is a story the church does not often engage. It’s too difficult, too uncomfortable, too laced with loose threads we can’t find time to connect. While all of those things may be true, it just may be that all of those complications make the story even more necessary. The fact that there are nearly 300,000 victims of rape and sexual assault in America each year is a good enough reason to engage this part of scripture. Tamar’s story is particularly heartbreaking for many reasons, and it tells us some really important details, while others we can discover through some careful research. We know that Amnon was Tamar’s brother, but a look beyond this text clarifies that they were half siblings, sharing David as their father. We also know that Amnon planned the rape. Jonadab was Amnon’s friend, but also, his cousin, and Tamar’s cousin, too, and Jonadab essentially suggested entrapping

Tamar. We know that Amnon feigned illness, because he knew it would give Tamar an appropriate reason to visit in order to provide care for him. The cakes she made for Amnon literally mean “heart dumplings” in the Hebrew. She came to care for her brother in his illness, making him food out of love and the care that women were expected to provide in those days, but instead, he raped her, in a culture and time in which brothers were supposed to offer protection and support. And it just might be that the worst part is yet to come. Once Amnon had forced himself on his sister, he was filled with so much self-loathing that he sent her away, fully aware that in those times and in that place, Tamar would never be accepted by a man in marriage, and that she would carry the shame with her for the rest of her life, not to mention the fact that she would need to continue to rely on men in her family for protection and support. Tamar tried to convince her brother to do the right thing, to approach their father and “make an honest woman of her”, as according to the customs of that time, half siblings could marry. But he refused and sent her out in to the street, instructing his servants to bolt the door behind her. But surely, Tamar could count on the support of her father, right? Apparently not, because the text tells us that while he became “very angry”, he would not punish Amnon because he loved him and he was his firstborn. Yes, you heard that right. King David, a man after God’s own heart, heard that his daughter had been raped by her brother, but he did not do anything about it, because he loved his son, his firstborn child. Let that sink in a little. Tamar was raped by her BROTHER, was thrown out into the street like a piece of garbage afterwards, and when her father found out, he was mad, but unwilling to do a darn thing about it. Where was Tamar’s protection? Where was her support? Why didn’t David love her enough to punish the person who had used her and cast her out? The truth of the matter is that we will never know the answer to those questions. The story continues in the text, and I invite you to read further on your own. In some ways, I suppose some justice was done, but it seems far too little and far too late to be of any real help to Tamar. The text DOES tell us that “she remained a desolate woman”, that is, a woman alone and removed from

the center of society because her brother would not control his lust and need for dominance.

This is a pretty sobering story. I could try to sugarcoat it, but that would be doing deep injustice to Tamar and to any woman who has been assaulted or raped. As scholar Anna Carter Florence wrote in an article in *Christian Century* in which she focused on the power of verbs operating in this story, “It takes courage to walk into this story and ask which verbs are ours. It takes boldness to ask where the story could have gone differently if only someone would had chosen a different verb. But asking such questions is our calling.” I happen to think those questions lead us to the good news, and here’s where it is for me in this story: When Tamar was forced out on to the street, the script she was given as a young woman of her time and place was to slink away quietly and stoically. Frankly, I’d say that many people would still prefer people not to speak out so publicly about abuse. It makes us uncomfortable and forces us to confront realities we’d rather ignore. But that’s not what Tamar did. Instead, invoking the cultural traditions of her land, she tore her garment and placed ashes on her head, symbols of mourning, but also, in the case of the ashes, signifying insignificance. She used cultural norms of her time to broadcast her pain and suffering and desolation. Furthermore, she did not go quietly in the street, but as the text tells us, she went away, crying aloud. I am overcome with how brave these acts were in that context. Tamar did not follow the script she had been given, but instead, used her voice to express her grief, her pain, her suffering, her fear, and reminded her rapist that she would not be silent in the face of his violence, an act that was criticized by her brother Absalom, who told her, “Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” Do not take this to heart?! I’m pained to admit that when I described my interpretation of this scripture as an earnest seminary student, that is, the good news of Tamar’s voice against the norms, a mentor of mine also suggested that perhaps silence would have been a better option. This idea makes an already agonizing story of pain and suffering absolutely unbearable.

So, what does this troubling and shocking text mean for us now? First of all, I take enormous comfort in the fact that it still exists for us to read and study. The process of including text in the biblical canon was complex and political, so the fact that this remains for us to wrestle with today is no accident. What do we do with it in a culture in which sexual violence is common and stories of entertainers, media moguls, and politicians having engaged in sexually assaulting, harassing or violent behavior towards women runs rampant? If we consider these high-profile examples in the news to be outliers, a quick survey of the women in our own circles makes it abundantly clear that sexual violence and assault is something most women understand. Statistics from the organization RAINN (Rape and Incest National Network) tell us that one out of six American women have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape, that 55% of victims were assaulted in or near their own home, and that every 98 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. While we know that the vast majority of sexual abuse victims are women, it's important to remember that women are not the only victims. Armed with this information, we could submit to resignation that there is too much to do, but surely God has called us to do hard things. The same God who surely grieved with Tamar, and who grieves with any person forced to reckon with life after rape, sexual assault or violence.

No one was looking out for Tamar and no one stood with her as a victim. The power of this story being located in the central text of our religious faith is that shaped by this story, we can be looking out for one another. We can get involved when it would be easier to ignore what we hear or see. We can educate our children about their own bodies and give them a sense of autonomy. We can stop shaming and make it abundantly clear that revealing clothing or too much alcohol NEVER give any right to put our hands on the bodies of others. And you better believe we can use our voices to push back against language that objectifies bodies. Saying things like "boys will be boys" creates an environment of acceptance that allows dangerous thoughts to fester

and abuse to thrive. And we can listen to the voices of victims crying out, hearing their agony, honoring their experiences, and doing all we can to make healing possible.

The great writer Tim O'Brien once said, "Stories save our lives." He meant that in stories we hear truths that may not be factual, but we are changed, empowered, and inspired by their power. I don't know if Tamar's story really happened, but I believe that it is absolutely true in the sense that real people, some of them our loved ones, or our own selves, have had similar experiences. Tamar's story reminds us that our voices are often really the still small voice of God within us, and we should never quiet them in the face of injustice on a personal or public level. This is a story that can inspire us to change our cultural norms and change the systems that allow for or actively cause harm.

Because of the bravery of people looking out for her, my grandmother grew up to be a trained teacher, a doting mother, inspiring Sunday school teacher, beginner of the church thrift store, and all around independent and headstrong woman who did not have to push through trauma her whole life. She married my grandfather, who was in the Navy during World War I, proudly serving his country like so many other veterans who we honor and offer our thanks tomorrow.

My grandmother's adoption contract is framed and hanging on my bedroom wall, a reminder that each of us can use whatever scraps of power we have, however small, to protect, and look out for those around us and create change. It just might be that our voices crying out for justice is among the greatest gifts God has given us to share with the world. Hide our light, our voice, under a bushel? No! We gotta let it shine. Amen.