

The Rape of Tamar

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2 Samuel 13:1-17

Some time passed. David's son, Absalom, had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son, Amnon, fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother, Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister."

Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down." She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat.

Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."

She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her. Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!"

But she said to him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me."

But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her."

“Bolt the door after her.” These words of Amnon identify one domestic violence perpetrator’s way to silence a victim – lock her out. Maintain power and control. If only I don’t see her. If only I don’t smell her. If only I don’t hear her, then I’m free. Free from the damage I’ve done. “Bolt the door.” It’s also what we do in the church with hard texts.

I wonder if this sermon series, “Passages I Love To Hate” might be the Spirit’s gift of a counterclockwise twist on the deadbolt, cracking open the door encouraging trust in God’s revelation – even and especially with the hard stories.

Last week I was at Yale Divinity School with member, Don Monteith, and our Director of Music Ministry, Ted Gibboney. We were participating in a study about worship in a particular place. As we left Yale, I asked, “Who have your mentors been for a life of faith, and how have they shaped the ways you live out your vocation?”

Don, who has had a lengthy career in nursing, shared a story of a particular nurse who said to her nursing students the first day of encountering the patient, “Before you go to enter a patient’s room, pause and say a little prayer, ‘Lord, help me to make a difference and to do no harm.’”

The minute Don said it I knew it was a prayer for the church. It was a prayer I needed to hear. *What if* we ask God, “Lord, help us to make a difference and to do no harm.” How might that help us stand before difficult texts without fear and with courage to act with justice?

Unmitigated violence is what happened in El Salvador to an entire community.

Our heavy manual labor was finished on the El Salvador Mission Trip. We’d mixed cement, carted bricks, mortared joints, and hauled loads. We’d moved north into the mountains on the Honduran border and planned a visit to a community called Mozote. The night before, we’d worshipped. We celebrated the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, sang with one another the simple song “You are called child of God,” and offered blessings through some giggles.

This day we were headed out as eco-tourists. On our way south out of the mountains, at an intersection next to a small concrete building, the van and bus stopped. There was some interaction with Sophia, and without explanation, an armed and uniformed policeman got into each of our vehicles. We were not threatened, but their entry had a sobering and silencing impact – the tenor of the ride to Mozote shifted a bit.

When you’re partially responsible for a brood of youth, who over the course of a week become like your own, a protective “Mamacita” air emerges. We turned left past a shell of an adobe home and made our way slowly down a narrow dirt road that eventually opened out into a square, the gathering area of Mozote.

The eastern edge of the gathering area had a few adobe buildings. The western edge was a newly constructed church with an archaic stone baptismal font out front and painted memorial murals on each sidewall. To the north was a memorial to the Mozote massacre. The focal point of the memorial was a metal silhouette of a family holding hands, set in front of a bricked rounded wall with inset pine plaques wood-burned with names of massacre victims.

In over 90-degree heat, with the armed guards flanking our group, and two young children selling us woven bracelets and dried sweet coconut, we huddled in front of the memorial and listened to the story of one of the few survivors of the massacre, Rufina Amaya Marquez.

During the Civil War in El Salvador, this particular place where we were standing was a killing field. From the east side of the square, forced into an adobe home, Rufina had watched as her husband was bound, shot, and decapitated.

Rufina's story is also a story of unmitigated violence unleashed on women. Soldiers marched small groups of young women and girls, some as young as 10, into the hills beyond the square. Quoting Rufina, "We could hear the women and girls being raped on the hills ... and the soldiers talking and joking, saying how much they liked twelve-year-olds."¹

As I listened, I surveyed our mission trip group of Senior Highs, and as both mother and pastor, I thought, "My God, we would have been like those young women marched to the hills, laughed about by the soldiers, buried in mass graves set afire." It made me wonder how scripture speaks into such violence and guides our thinking about God when we hear such atrocities.

In Memphis, and through our connection to Idlewild Elementary School as an adopt a school, this week we know intimately the pain wrecked by domestic violence. In one afternoon, a police officer lost his life, two children lost their father, and a wife lost her husband because of domestic violence gone unchecked. A kindergarten teacher at our adopt a school, Betsy Warren, now greets each day as a widow, with the knowledge that her life is radically changed, forever altered, and marked by senseless violence that rippled out from domestic violence known as battering.

The church has something to say about supporting the widows, which guides our responses when we move in with casseroles and condolences. But when it comes to domestic violence, as a church, I believe we need to be on the front lines – and we aren't. As both a mother and a pastor, I long for the church to be a place that is real and authentic – where we don't shy away from hard facts of human suffering, especially among women as victims of domestic violence.

Every two minutes in the United States, a woman is sexually assaulted. In the time it takes for us to worship this morning, 30 women will have been assaulted. Of those statistics, 44 percent of the victims of sexual assault are under 18 years of age, and 80% are under 30 years old. Sexual assault includes sexual harassment, rape, battering, and child sexual abuse. Sexual assaults are the most underreported crimes, with 60% of cases going unreported. Two-thirds of all sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim, often occurring in the home, and 38% of rapists are either by a friend or acquaintance.² One out of three women will be raped in her lifetime.³ We cannot be silent in the face of such statistics.

In her book, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, Pamela Cooper-White says of this biblical text, "Tamar's story, sadly, is still modern:

- Tamar was sexually assaulted, not by a stranger, but by someone she knew.
- The violation took place not in a dark alley or in a desolate park, but by a member of her own family in his home.
- Tamar was exploited through one of her most vulnerable traits – her kindness and her upbringing to take care of another.
- Tamar said no; her no was not respected.⁴

I look at this difficult text from Tamar's point of view. There are three points that I call "If only" moments. By "if only," I mean, had the responses of the individuals been different, Tamar would not have suffered as a silenced, desolate woman. "The

word for desolate, *somema*, is used to refer to land that is laid waste.”⁵ I stake my life on the good news that God does not intend that any one individual of God’s good creation be left as land that is laid waste.

One, *if only* Jonadab had *given different advice*. *What if* Jonadab had redirected Amnon’s love? The love is later described as lust. *What if* we think about the quality of our friendships and the advice we share and receive? *What if* we examine the places, things, and people we lust over and ask our community to hold us accountable for responsible behavior? Lust is real, but acting out of lust on the bad advice of friends, at the expense of another, is often violent and always wrong. *How* are we making space for healthy friendships in the church?

A study by the American Psychological Association suggests that children, before finishing elementary school, have witnessed an estimated eight thousand murders and one hundred thousand acts of violence, based on a 27 hours of television per week average.⁶ When we passively expose our children to violence or actively initiate them with video games that invite violence, we allow them to detach from the important blessing and value of each individual and the connectivity among humanity. Such passive exposure allows us to distance ourselves from being in healthy relationships and friendships, and allows us to objectify others and desensitize ourselves to violence.

I know this most in two ways, when a pastor who used to be in our presbytery said to me, “Our troubles all began with you – when we began ordaining women.” He had been desensitized to a woman’s value as a pastor. But I also know this as a parent, in arguments in our home around video games. Our good friends own *Mortal Kombat*, the game where you can rip off an opponent’s neck and “turn off” the blood, and our son loves to play it. Our son’s a great kid, but this game is not right for the ways it objectifies a victim and desensitizes violence.

My second “if only” moment is *if only* Amnon had *not pretended* to be sick. *What if* Amnon had been honest? Historically women were considered property; David could have made a choice to end Amnon’s torment. We hear that plea from Tamar herself when she says to Amnon, “I pray you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.” *What if* we examine the places where we put on fronts, acting like something that we’re not? *What if* we ask our community and as a community we speak truth with one another when we see falsehood? *How* are we making space for authenticity in the church?

And the third “if only” moment is *if only* Tamar’s voice *had been heard, honored and respected*. *What if* Amnon had heard Tamar? The text tells us that Tamar, after the rape, put ashes on her head, tore her clothes, laid her hand on her head, and went away from the bolted door, crying aloud. Surely someone heard her. Surely. What is it that after that point the biblical text silences Tamar?⁷ *What if* it had been different? *What if* the community had heard Tamar’s cry and responded with justice? *What if* Tamar’s life story was a model of mid-rash we used for raising our daughters and our sons – talking openly and honestly about issues of sexuality – especially, that no means no, in all instances – that forced sex is violence, never intimacy? *How* are we as a church creating safe spaces to hear, honor, and respect the hard stories? *How* are we listening to voices long silenced?

When you’ve been a victim of violence, when you’ve thought you had a voice, but then discover the pain of shame, sometimes covered by silence’s secrets, or maybe

the pain is buried so deep you don't even know why your life rages – what will you say to the church? *If only you had been there.*

I pray it isn't so.

In El Salvador, Rufina Amaya Marquez escaped through the night after having lost her family to indescribable violence. When she found herself away from the soldiers, she says, "I prayed to God ... to save my life. After that, I open up the earth with my bare hands and in the bowl of earth, I weep my tears." I see Tamar holding Rufina's tears from the earliest of generations.

I pray it is so.

I pray, as the church, we don't shy away from hard texts, but we listen to them, particularly the voices that seem to be absent, and that with a critical eye we ask what is to be learned here? How might we make a difference, and do no harm?

If only, with God's help, we will make it so.

To the God of Tamar and Rahab, Rufina Amaya and Betsy Warren, to the God who demands justice for all victims of domestic violence and sexual assaults; to One God be all glory, now and forever.

Notes

1 "The Truth of El Mozote," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 1993.

2 U.S. Department of Justice, 2005 National Crime Victimization Study, 2005.

3 Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 80.

4 Cooper-White, 4.

5 P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 321.

6 Cooper-White, 21.

7 Absalom hears Tamar and seeks revenge on her behalf and names his daughter after Tamar. However, the text does not allow Tamar's advocacy for herself for the "wrong" done to her.