

Sermon: Silenced Kimberly Patch

Whew! Aren't you glad YOU came to church today? Judges 19. I have never heard a sermon on this text. I didn't realize that in order for me to hear the sermon, I would be the one to give the sermon. Phyllis Tribble refers to Judges 19 as the Text of Terror, and terror it is. But I don't want to just read a passage and explain it. I want to go deep as we look at the actions of an unnamed woman, her father and her husband in what amounts to a classic case of domestic violence. This text is deserving of a view from the lens of terror but most of all, this text deserves to be studied and congregations should hear sermons on this text.

Let's start with the cold, hard facts. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, more than 1 in 3 women and more than 1 in 4 men in the US have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime. With these statistics it is imperative for the church to actively and vocally become an advocate for those who are suffering and those who have previously suffered acts of domestic violence. It cannot be ignored that some of these victims and survivors of domestic violence, are sitting among us every Sunday morning just as they appear in our God-breathed scripture. For this sermon, you will hear me utilizing female pronouns. I want to be clear this is not to diminish the fact that men also experience domestic violence. This text is about a woman and many times women are the ones who seek help. Men, unfortunately, are less likely to do so.

As we dig into the text, let's make sure we get the relationships right in this story. The woman is a concubine, which is to mean she is a secondary wife, although there is no mention of a first wife. The Levite is her "husband." He is from the priestly tribe of Israel. The concubine's father is the Levite's father-in-law. So he's her husband but she is not called his wife. The father is the father-in-law to the Levite man but the woman is not called the Levite's wife. Not only does she not have a name in this narrative, but she also has the lowest status of anyone in the passage. She is mere property.

Domestic violence isn't always defined as physical or sexual violence. Emotional violence is a real thing. Two signs of emotional violence are using male privilege against a woman to discredit and diminish, OR treating her like a servant, making her feel bad about herself and humiliating her.

The chapter begins with the woman fleeing her situation. She left him and went back to live with her father. Our text says she was "angered with him." She fled. The Levite went to her father's home to "speak tenderly to her." He would woo her back with kind words. Were his words not so tender before? There is one other place in the Hebrew Bible where a man spoke tenderly to a woman. Shechem spoke tenderly to woo Dinah to marry him after he had raped her. Do you see how this phrase is related to violence?

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a woman will leave and go back to her abuser seven times before she leaves for good. Many of us cannot comprehend these dynamics but they are real. It is not the place of friends, family or the church to condemn the victim for this, but instead we must help them to break the silence. And let me be clear, when it comes to leaving an abuser, it must be the decision of the victim as to how, and when, she will leave as it is the most dangerous time in an abusive relationship. The victim is the only person who knows exactly how far the abuser will go to maintain control. Many times they are protecting other family members when they stay with or go back to their abuser. In fact,

according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 20% of homicide victims in domestic violence cases are family members, friends and acquaintances of the victim.

The exchange at the woman's father's home is one of hospitality toward the husband and the woman does not speak in this part of the narrative. She is silenced and agency is taken away from her as a human being within this story. All discussion takes place between the father and the husband. The father begs the husband to stay day after day showing gracious hospitality to the husband. What is he doing here? Many say this is a contrast to the inhospitable people from the town of Gibeah. I have a different thought. Was this father, who loved enough to take his daughter back into his household trying to keep his daughter home rather than just letting the married couple leave? Was he trying to protect his daughter? Did she tell him why she ran away from her husband? My guess is that she did tell him and as a loving father would, he tried to protect her. He was successful for a short period of time but the Levite man eventually left with the concubine.

Domestic violence statistics are alarming. Nearly half the women killed by homicide 2003-2014 were domestic violence cases. 75% of those cases happened AFTER the victim left. Let that sink in. After the victim does something for herself, after she gains courage to leave, after she stands up to her abuser, this is the time she is in the most danger of being murdered by her abuser.

During their travels, a man took the couple and their party into safe harbor overnight. The safety was a façade as men came, surrounded the home and wanted to rape the Levite. The Levite grabbed his concubine, threw her out the door and said to do what they want with her, they could have her for the night. HE THEN WENT TO SLEEP. How do I know he went to sleep? The text says in verse 27 he got up the next morning, opened the door to continue on his way, his concubine was at the door with her hands on the threshold. He said to her "Get up, let's go." He had no intention on taking her with him. He was going to leave without her. When she was there at his feet, there was no emotion, no caring, gentle words. He demanded she get up and when she couldn't, he put her on his donkey and left. There is no text to tell us how she died. It could have been at the threshold, it may have been on the donkey or it could have been later in the story. But it doesn't matter when she died, the point is, she died an unnecessary death, beaten and raped while her husband slept. It was all so unnecessary.

According to NY Behavioral Health, there are three types of abusers. The first is the predatory abuser. They have no emotion and seek out a person to abuse. They often present with personality disorders. The second is an affectively motivated abuser. They present with attachment problems and present with a very high emotion. The abuse is impulsive and is generally more psychological and emotional. The last type of abuser is the instrumental abuser. They use aggression to achieve a desired outcome. Personal gain is more important than their concern for others. Does this last one sound familiar? Does it sound like the Levite man?

The treatment of this woman started a civil war where hundreds of thousands of people died. It was a volatile time in the history of Israel when there was not a figure in leadership and Israel was not keeping their eyes on God. The battles would be started on lies told by the Levite man about what happened (see chapter 20). Still more evidence that he was only concerned for himself.

I can imagine the words of the concubine much like parts of Psalm 55

My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.
And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
truly, I would flee far away;
It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—
I could hide from them.
But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng.

It is the responsibility of the church to break the silence, as violence of any kind is contrary to God's intentions for humankind. Yet the church does more to suppress the text of terror by making it a "text of silence." Judges 19 is excluded from the lectionary. It is both a text of terror and a text of silence. It is silenced by the church in the action of excluding it from the lectionary, and it is silenced on the mere refusal to preach on this text in reference to domestic violence. I believe the people are not named in this text because this is applicable to a larger problem. Violence against women is wrong in the eyes of God. The subjugation of the victim in a domestic violence situation is wrong and the hurtful power distributions are opposite of God's desire for humankind.

In order to oppose these harmful power distributions, Session has voted to adopt a domestic violence policy. It outlines an appropriate response to domestic violence allegations that can be facilitated while affording dignity to the victim. Westminster believes it is the responsibility of the church to provide a safe and spiritually responsible response to victims of domestic violence, both from the community and from within the church.

I helped Westminster to draft this policy in response to domestic violence. I am also assisting in building a strong relationship with Community Action Program's domestic violence advocacy program and will act on a voluntary basis as Westminster's DV Liaison. In this position, I will work side by side with Patrick in ensuring we do everything we can to afford every domestic violence victim and survivor, a voice of their own. This will ensure responsible care of those who come to us when they are able to do so. We will be prepared to offer assistance when a victim reaches out to us.

So how can we find grace in this story? Where do we always find grace but at the foot of the cross? We must look to Christ himself and compare. In John 8:1-11, the Pharisees and scribes brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus with the intention of stoning her according to the Law. Jesus said that the man without sin should cast the first stone. He then spoke to the woman and told her he did not condemn her, to change the direction of her life and to go on her way. Jesus ended the violence with action. For far too long the universal Christian church has replicated the Judges 19 biblical story for self-preservation. It is time for the church to be like Jesus and interrupt the cycle of violence. Judges keeps the violence going. Jesus says this ends NOW. The Levite man threw the woman to the wolves to save himself. Jesus offers himself so we do not have to do so.

I would like to read you a poem:

I Got Flowers Today
by Paulette Kelly

I got flowers today!
It wasn't my birthday or any other special day;
We had our first argument last night;
And he said a lot of cruel things that really hurt;
I know that he is sorry and didn't mean to say the things he said;
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today!
It wasn't our anniversary or any other special day;
Last night he threw me into a wall and then started choking me;
It seemed unreal, a nightmare, but you wake up from nightmares;
And I woke up this morning sore and bruised all over — but I know he is sorry;
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today!
And it wasn't Valentines Day or any other special day;
Last night he beat me and threatened to kill me;
Make-up and long sleeves didn't hide the cuts and bruises this time;
I couldn't go to work today because I didn't want anyone to know — but I know he's
sorry;
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today!
And it wasn't Mother's Day or any other special day;
Last night he beat me again, and it was worse than all of the other times;
If I leave him, what will I do? How will I take care of the kids? What about money?
I'm afraid of him, but I'm too scared and dependent to leave him! But he must be sorry;
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today....
Today was a special day — it was the day of my funeral;
Last night he killed me;
If only I would have gathered the courage and strength to leave him;
I could have received help from the Women's Shelter, but I didn't ask for their help;

So I got flowers today — for the last time.

If you desire to know more about what you can do to serve the victims of domestic violence in the Cayuga County area, we are planning an adult forum where we will discuss the new DV policy put in place, my role as DV Liaison between Westminster, victims and survivors, and Community Action Program. Domestic violence is a problem as old as humankind is out of Eden. It will not be solved today, or tomorrow, but let us work together to break the chains off the victims who are silenced in terror. Amen.