

## COURAGE TO REPENT/COURAGE TO CHANGE

*Luke 7:36-8:3 (woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears)*

*2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15 (David and Bathsheba)*

I'm going to start with a warning. I think I'm about to preach one of the most radical sermons I've ever given. If not radical, then at the very least, one that centers on a topic rarely mentioned from the pulpit. It is definitely going to be on the prophetic side and not so much the cuddly priestly side. You may not agree with everything I'm about to say, and that's ok. I hope it provokes thought and post-sermon conversation. And let me say this: I have avoided, in my years of ministry, really going all out "feminist", for various reasons. I have spoken openly for the marginalized, for those who are oppressed, for the queer community, for even the poor widow (as that is exactly what Jesus did). But I've steered clear of being a powerful voice for women in our present culture, because well, I'm one of them. It seems somewhat self-serving. I've often told myself someone else needs to be giving that sermon. But, today, I just can't be quiet or even subdued. Because this week, dear people, one big story was the young Stanford man who got a 6 month (which will effectively be reduced to a 3 month) sentence for raping a young woman. (And yes, the subject matter of this sermon is PG rated, but then again, so are the Scripture texts this morning. I will be as careful as I can, parents of young children.)

The Scripture texts. David and Bathsheba. One of the most well-known stories of the Old Testament. Let me summarize in as much of a nutshell as I can muster: King David sees Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, bathing on a rooftop. Uriah is a loyal soldier in King David's army. But King David summons Bathsheba to him and, let me say this clearly, because he was a king and she was basically another man's property who had no power to say no, RAPES her. Bathsheba becomes pregnant, but woops, her husband Uriah has been off to war, with a pregnancy a little tough to explain. So David covers his "misdeed" by summoning his soldier Uriah home for a leave. That backfires as well, since upright Uriah insists on staying away from his wife while his comrades risk combat. So King David does something even more heinous. He orders a military strategy that will result in Uriah's death. OK. Plain talk. Powerful King David progresses from rape to murder.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading today follows up with Nathan confronting King David with a parable about how a rich man stole a poor man's lamb and David's subsequent recognition of himself in the parable. One message: God forgives even the most heinous of deeds. And more importantly for what I want to say today: Sometimes we are nudged into repentance. Repentance, which then hopefully involves a new way of seeing.

The gospel lesson in Luke gives us another story of forgiveness. This time a woman is also involved. A "woman of the city", we are told, who was a sinner, comes uninvited to Simon the Pharisee's house, as he is hosting a dinner with Jesus. She shocks the whole kit and caboodle of

important men at that dinner by washing Jesus' feet with her tears of overwhelming love upon being forgiven, and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. And then, these are the judgmental-as-all-get-out words from Simon: "If this man (Jesus) were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Jesus proceeds to cut Simon down a well-deserved notch by pointing out that the woman superseded Simon's hospitality by miles and says this: "Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but whoever is forgiven little, loves little."

And how does all of this have to do with the story of the Stanford rapist?

Well, there are some threads here that I'd like to point out. And I really long to do this in a dialogue form rather than somehow pretend to tell you like it is, but here are my thoughts: Power and privilege still seem to take a front seat when it comes to consequences for assaults against women. How much have we progressed as a society when kings in ancient times and Olympic hopeful swimmer frat boys in our times still don't face logical consequences? And how about this? Where are the women in these stories? How often do they and their needs get mentioned? OK. Granted, it's the Bible, written by patriarchs in a patriarchal society. But that's when we remember Jesus' words to Simon the Pharisee regarding the woman, crying at Jesus' feet. He says, "Simon, do you see this woman?" Again, just as I talked about with the widow of Nain last week, Jesus SEES the woman. And yes, as a once victim of assault, I just want to cry my own tears of overwhelming joy when I hear that Jesus SEES.

So, no people, it ISN'T AND SHOULDN'T be all about King David. It should be about Bathsheba, too. About her pain upon being violated, her pain about her husband being killed, her pain about her baby dying. Let us SEE Bathsheba.

It shouldn't be all about Simon and the Pharisees and how upright they are. It SHOULD be about the woman (who was called a "sinner", we don't know the sin, but of course, we assume it's a sexual sin since she's a woman of the Bible). It SHOULD be about the system that put her in such a position. And, by the way, thank you, Jesus for seeing her and yes, making it about her for just a short time.

It ISN'T AND SHOULDN'T be about a young man who drank too much (which ironically, was HIS excuse, and yet HER blame) and violated a young woman who was UNCONSCIOUS. It shouldn't be about the losses he faces, but we should be talking about the losses SHE faces. Listen. I have no need to vilify here. Our Scripture stories are about forgiveness, after all, and no one is beyond God's forgiveness. I just need, in 2016, for her, the victim, to be SEEN.

And what would Jesus do? What is the message to us today? I read a wonderful article by a woman named Emmy Kegler, a young pastor serving in the Minneapolis area, pointing out that forgiveness of sin is indeed important between the transgressor and God, but it leaves out the part about the sin against neighbor: "If the concern with sin is that it endangers our eternal salvation, we forget what our sin does to those we sin against. If the only prayer is "Forgive us," we are no longer accountable to those we harm. We, suddenly, get to serve no sentence

even for twenty minutes of degrading violence, no matter what damage it did to our forgotten victim.

When we reduce sin to only a transaction between an individual and God which is fully covered by the blood of Jesus, we ignore two crucial elements of the abuse, oppression, violence, and death which reign in the world today: victims and systems.”

And that is where we come in, dear lovers of Jesus and lovers of justice for the oppressed.

Because somewhere in this lies a culture of rape. A system that still blames the victim. (Shame on Bathsheba for taking a bath; shame on the assault victim for drinking too much and being unconscious.)

I said at the beginning that the Bathsheba/David story carries this message:

Sometimes we are nudged into repentance. Repentance, which then hopefully involves a new way of seeing.

I hope the experience of the Stanford violence can awaken us to a new way of seeing. SEEING THE VICTIM, #1. But also seeing the way we raise our children to be aware, our college students, our understanding of the system that created this in the first place. That’s where OUR repentance comes in, and then, yes, hopefully our new way of seeing. AMEN.