

Nearly 50 years ago I enrolled in Duke Divinity School and later became an ordained clergywoman, back when that was still a rarity. I'd always be put on regional and national committees for Women's Concerns. Over decades I became more educated about, and a stronger advocate for, all the ways in which women were subjected to violence and abuse. But even more than that, as a pastor who is female, other women would confide in me things they said they had never told a male pastor. The stories of sexual assault were sad and heart-breaking. Even though they were victims, they blamed themselves and felt society blamed them. Women even feel like the church wouldn't really accept them if they knew the secret shame of the sexual assaults they've suffered.

Rev. Dr. Elaine Heath, a former professor of missional and pastoral theology and Dean of Duke Divinity School from 2016-2018, wrote about the reaction to a sermon from when she served as pastor of a Methodist Church in the Ohio River Valley. The region suffered unusually high rates of sexual abuse and domestic violence, so after a couple years, Heath preached a sermon series to bring scripture stories to help recognize, prevent and bring healing to victims of such violence. After the benediction one Sunday, a sweet, quiet lady lingered until everyone else had left the sanctuary. The stylish, beautiful older woman – almost 80 – was a regular attender with her husband, but never interacted with others – even during Passing the Peace and never coming to Fellowship events. After some hesitation, the old lady told Heath that the sermon had really touched her, and despite going to church all her life, she felt for the first time she actually understood every word.

Let me quote from Heath's 2019 book, Healing the Wounds of Sexual Abuse: Reading the Bible with Survivors:

"With no change in facial expression or tone of voice, (the woman) matter-of-factly continued, 'My neighbor and his friend raped me. Two of them, together one after the other. They were in high school. I was seven years old.' The words came out with no more emotion than if she were telling me what she had for dinner the night before. 'I hadn't thought of it in a long time. Your sermon made me remember it.' The faintest glimmer of pain began to show in her eyes. 'I've never told anyone before,' she whispered. That sermon marked the beginning of (her) healing."

Later this elderly woman told Heath that before she admitted her abuse, she had never been able to experience prayer or spiritual feeling the way other people seemed to. Despite faithful church attendance and longing to know God more fully, it wasn't until she heard her own story of suffering reflected back from the Bible story, and experienced a pastor willing to address violence and assert that healing and redemption were really possible, that she was truly able to experience the love of God.

Over ten years ago the U.S. Center for Disease Control published statistics that shocked the country, revealing that nearly 1 in 5 women are sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. There had also been an earlier study with research on 2 college campuses, which produced data that 1 in 5 college women were subjected to attempted sexual assault. Then, in the Fall of 2017, the #MeToo hashtag had incredible numbers of women revealing on social media that they too, had been subjected to sexual violence, assault and harassment. It turns out that saying 1 in 5 women are sexually assaulted during their lifetime may be too low a statistic. Sexual assault and rape are the most under-reported crimes in America.

Statistics apply to general populations, and it doesn't mean that any particular group of women, such as the women in worship this morning, would fit that exact pattern. But it remains the fact, that for every 5 women you know, it is likely that one of them is a victim of sexual assault. You may not know about it, you may not suspect it. As the saying goes, You don't know what you don't know. But for any church to be a place for real restoration and wholeness for women, it needs to be sensitive to the numbers of women who have suffered psychic and spiritual wounds from violence perpetrated upon them. Of course, women are not the only victims of rape. Statistically, if we gather a group of 5 women, 1 is statistically likely to have been a victim of sexual assault; and if we gather a group of 71 men, 1 is statistically likely to have been a rape victim.

Sexual assault and abuse have been a plague on society for thousands of years. Even the Bible's Old Testament contains tragic stories of sexual abuse, rape, and incest. Phyllis Trible, the esteemed Old Testament scholar whose articles in the *American Academy of Religion* I relied on for my Hebrew exegetical paper back in 1977, published a book in 1984 called "Texts of Terror." Drawn from a lecture series at Yale Divinity School, Trible highlighted the cruel violence inflicted on 4 different women in Old Testament stories. Today's Hebrew scripture passage is one of them.

2 Samuel chapter 13 is not found in the lectionary cycle. As an Episcopal priest, my friend Peter Williams would never have gotten to preach on it, because he had to have permission from the Bishop to go off lectionary. If you read the Bible from some devotional series, it is unlikely that you will read this chapter. Only if you embark on one of those programs in which you read the Bible cover to cover, will you read about Amnon, one of King David's sons, contriving to get his half-sister, Tamar, alone and force himself upon her. Despite Tamar's objections, and attempts to leverage at least a marriage to her brother since Amnon insists on "having his way with her" she is first violated, and then abandoned. When she finally confides what has happened to her full brother, Absalom, *Her brother Absalom said to her, 'Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your*

brother; do not take this to heart.’ So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house.

Although Tamar is the one left broken and desolate, the point of view of the Biblical story is about the men in the story. Even in those ancient days, victims were told to keep the abuse a secret. Scripture continues to talk about the brothers, their enmity and the eventual revenge killing of Amnon by Absalom. Scripture talks about their father King David, who nearly loses his kingdom to Absalom by refusing to condemn him for his brother’s murder. The patriarchy in the story is palpable – it’s all about male honor, male vengeance, male power. But scripture, like Amnon himself, abandons Tamar. We are told nothing more about her after she remained quietly desolate in her brother’s house. Tamar is locked in the silence, shame, violation, and trauma of the abuse she suffered at the hands of someone she knew.

Tamar’s is the story of women today who are sexually assaulted, not necessarily by a stranger, as the rape myth claims, but often by a family member, a friend, someone known to them. And the psychic wound of such a betrayal by someone familiar can seem even worse than an assault by a stranger or enemy.

Sexual relations of themselves are not bad, are not sinful. The Christian Church, especially in the West, has sent convoluted and confused messages about the expression of human sexual nature. The Church has rarely talked honestly and openly about sexuality—what it is, what it’s for, what makes it holy, what makes it unholy. Instead of wrestling with these deep questions of faith, instead of unpacking the stories of scripture, instead of discerning where the church can offer healing and wholeness, too often the church has chosen to reinforce ancient gender roles or scapegoat homosexuals.

Thank goodness the United Church of Christ and Unitarians developed the “Our Whole Lives” age-appropriate sexual curriculum to promote education and help children, youth and young adults make healthy, responsible behavioral choices. The OWL curriculum teaches a theology of sexuality based on God’s love, on mutual consent, and strong commitment.

But sexual assault isn’t about the victim’s choice. No one makes a choice to be assaulted. Contemporary literature, film, music and social media too often portray sexual violence in ways that promote societal acceptance of assault as something that happens. Advertising, fashion and make-up industries all exploit female bodies. The commodification of the female body and misogyny in society, the workplace and in family structure, is accepted as normal in so many every-day ways that we can hardly even see it. Patriarchy and privilege are the platform upon which rape culture is built.

Rape culture, which blames the victims, has girls and women believing they should have dressed differently, done their hair or make-up differently, said something different or said nothing at all, left earlier or not gone someplace at all, not walked alone to their car, not opened the door, not done something... as if they as victim had the agency to prevent the action of the perpetrator. Finally, in the last decade, I have heard social messages addressing the real problem – instead of just telling girls and women not to dress provocatively, not to go where they are at risk, not to drink any alcohol, etc., tell boys and men Don't rape. If you are a male college student like Brock Turner, and after a frat party come across a young women passed out by a dumpster from over-drinking, don't sexually assault her. Don't rape.

Research on sexual assault and its effects has determined that victims of sexual assault react much like soldiers exposed to violent trauma in war. They have PTSD. They have triggers that take them involuntarily back to the trauma. Some victims deny what happened, or wall it off inside themselves. Some victims never forget it but still never talk about it, feeling deep shame and blame for having had it happen to them. Especially when sexual violation is suffered as a child or young adult, dysfunctional sexual patterns such as promiscuity often happen. The internal messages of a rape victim are things like "I must have done something wrong. I somehow deserved it. I am to blame. I am not only ashamed, but a shameful person. I am unlovable. This is a stain of sin so great that I can't be loved by God."

And that's why the Church needs to talk about sexual assault even though it is a terrible thing – otherwise the gospel's good news of grace, of cleansing, of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of restoration to wholeness, of having a new life – that good news can't get through. Like the elderly woman in Heath's Ohio Church, the trauma of sexual abuse is locked inside women until it is safe enough to talk about, to bring out the hidden pain, to disclose the awful reality that has left a hurting, incomplete person.

Some Christian women say they themselves have never been raped, and don't know anyone who has. They're lucky for themselves, and probably don't know the full truth about all the other women they think they know. I myself have fortunately not had to suffer the trauma of sexual abuse or assault. I have known community members, parishioners, friends, and even relatives who have. My own children only reluctantly confessed as adults that they had been victimized by a church member when they were little.

Heath reported that she had a revelation when she went to her 5th grade daughter's school one night for parents to preview a film warning about the dangers of sexual predators and give permission for their children to watch it. In the film, a little girl's next door neighbor groomed her for sexual abuse. Her parents tragically missed the warning signs, and the child was

victimized. While the film was vague enough to be appropriate for fifth graders, it was deeply disturbing to the parents who previewed it. Heath wrote, *"As I walked home with a neighbor, she asked what I thought about the film and whether I would allow my daughter to see it. All of a sudden, the words rushed out, surprising me with their dark truth. It was as if I was listening to someone else say "I am that child. That is what happened to me."*

"The woman looked at me horrified, and didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to say. I could not believe I had told this neighbor, whom I scarcely knew, the darkest secret of my life. I was glad for the darkness of the night, so that she could not see my embarrassment. It would take me years to come to terms with that shame and be delivered from the feeling of uncleanness that had been put in me by perpetrators."

Heath's survival strategy as a child was to block out her memories. *That night as I walked home from my childrens' school, I woke up. It was the beginning of my healing journey.* Until Heath revealed her trauma and began to talk about it, until she named her experience, she didn't recognize herself as having been molested as a child or sexually assaulted as a young adult. One of the perpetrators was a pastor, and his abuse damaged her views of Christianity and of God in ways that took decades to recover from. As an adult, Heath tried to be a good person and a good mother. She was active in church. Later, working with other survivors of childhood sexual assault, she discovered that a common pattern and defense was to try desperately to be a good, model citizen but feel like a failure and fraud inside. Survivors don't know how deeply their anxiety and shame control daily life because they haven't recognized ways the sexual abuse affects them as victims.

We are in the Church Season of Lent, of penitence and contrition. Instead of keeping sexual assault in a separate compartment of life, removed from church, removed from discussion by Christians, a topic not allowed in worship and forbidden to address in a sermon, churches need to open up. Victims of sexual violence often feel ashamed and alienated from their faith community. Like Tamar, they have been told to keep quiet, to not talk about it, to not disturb other people, to deal with their pain and get over it, to accept that they must have done something wrong to have something so wrong happen to them.

While it is difficult to address the trauma of sexual assault, the reality is that both outside of our church family, and within it, persons have suffered like Tamar in the Bible, like the old woman in the Ohio Methodist Church, like Rev. Heath when she was just a child. Heath and other church leaders who work with victims of sexual assault teach the importance of addressing sexual assault within a theological framework. They present the need to

address this painful topic in local churches. If the Federated Church wants to be intentional about being the kind of church that promotes healing for all kinds of spiritual and psychic wounds, then it needs to include sexual trauma. The Federated Church already took steps to try and make sure the church and programs are safe spaces by adopting a Safe Church Policy back in 2019. In 2026 the national news is full of the Epstein Files. Franklin County has posters to End the Abuse (about the age of consent in Massachusetts and relationships of power which teachers, coaches and resource officers have over students). Silence, not speaking up, in the face of any injustice or harm is a choice that is noticed.

How can this church present the gospel and interpret the scriptures in ways that God's divine healing grace can shine on even the most hidden secrets? Heath was preparing for ministry in seminary when she struggled with the Matthew 25 story of sheep and goats. Heath said that after re-reading the passage again and again, she recalled images on the daily news and then:

"Something shifted in me, as if I had been wearing someone else's glasses, and I took them off and now could see clearly. All of a sudden, I saw Jesus IN the suffering people, hidden within their obscurity, loving them, and experiencing all their pain, even when they did not know he was there..."

"Then without warning, right in the middle of seeing Jesus profoundly present in "the least of these," the memories of my abuse surfaced. The images flooded my mind, but this time to my astonishment, I saw Jesus with me and in me suffering everything. I saw his love for me, his unwillingness for me to suffer alone, and his judgement against the abuse. I felt his promise for new life in me in the future, his determination to heal my wounds, his "no" to the shame and sin that scarred my life."

The incandescent presence of Christ penetrated Heath's childhood trauma. May the incandescent presence of Christ enter the dark places in your soul, and may God's love heal your spiritual and psychic wounds.

Please reach out if you want to follow up with conversation, learn about resources, or otherwise follow up on this sermon and worship service.