

Our Bodies & Voices Matter

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, April 26, 2018

2 Samuel 13: 10-20 and John 8: 1-11

We don't often hear the story of Tamar in church. We're lucky if a Bible study group reads it or we choose to read it for ourselves. And why would anyone be willing to visit it? The narrative is a horrific story—not only about a brutal incestuous rape but also about the shaming and silencing of the victim by her own family. We get uncomfortable reading and listening to it. For some of us, the story may trigger memories of sexual violence and abuse. It also may get us wondering if sexual justice will ever be realized.

Here at St. Paul's we heard Tamar's story during a Eucharist as part of our Lenten series *Hunger: Sacred Conversations about Our Bodies*. It was a courageous move, one that conveyed the message that the voices and bodies of survivors matter.

Tamar's voice and body does not matter in the 2 Samuel narrative. She pleads with Amnon, making various appeals with her brother to forego the act he is intent on perpetrating. But Amnon cannot be reasoned with or appealed to; he rapes Tamar then forces her out of his sight as if she is disposable. Equally troubling is the response of Absalom, Tamar's other brother. When Absalom realizes Amnon has raped Tamar, he tells her "be quiet for now." Tamar goes from being a woman with a voice, an active agent, to a woman stripped of agency—notice she no longer speaks in the passage following her rape. She only tears her robe, a sign of mourning, and cries. She remains "desolate," shocked and broken by trauma. There is no redemption in Tamar's story.

Perhaps the reason why we have such a difficult time with Tamar's story is that it hits too close to home, because sexual and gender-based violence and oppression remain reality, as does the shaming and silencing of survivors. The backlash against the Me Too movement is a potent reminder of attempts made to silence those who dare to speak out against sexual assault and harassment. However, survivors and allies alike, women and men together, are continuing to stand in solidarity. They are daring to break the silence. They are standing

against the shaming. They are sharing their stories. That takes courage and is part of the healing process.

Jesus, in John's story of the woman accused of adultery, demonstrates courage as an ally. The passage begins as a narrative about male violence against women until Jesus turns it around. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Each of the men leave. Notice that, up until this point, the woman has been voiceless. But the moment Jesus asks "has no one condemned you," we hear her voice. She answers, "no one." Jesus offers the woman a voice where she previously had none. He not only offers agency but also compassion. He recognizes that her voice and body matters. He doesn't shame her. He merely says "go your way and sin no more," not to dismiss but to liberate. And isn't that always God's desire—to liberate us from oppression?

May we desire the same for ourselves and others because Tamar's voice and body matters. *Our* voices and bodies *do* matter.