

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; and a dash of Romans 12:9
The Rev. Brooks Cato

On a misty day last weekend, cuddled up with the dogs, a blanket, and a hot drink, it finally felt like fall. And so, with the transition away from summer nearly complete and the cold days of winter ahead, I decided to do just about the best thing I know how to mark the season. I watched a movie. I'm still not sure if I think this is a good movie, but it's left me with a different way of thinking I hope I can hang onto. The movie, called "Women Talking," is a fictional story about a group of women who're part of a Christian cult. At times, it's hard to watch, so trigger warning here: in this cult, sexual assault runs rampant. So, the women meet in secret while the men're away. And while the men are away, the women take a vote. Will they stay and do nothing, stay and fight the men when they return, or leave? The whole story runs off that question. It's not perfect and sometimes it feels a little too like *A Performance*, but my God, is it powerful. (I will say this: I'm certain that being a man affects how I saw this movie. Women and nonbinary folks, I've got no idea, not really, how this one reads for you; I'd love to hear your thoughts on it.)

What makes it so intellectually sticky is the direct handling of sexual assault and the difficulty their brand of Christian theology presents in the face of so much tragedy. Forgiveness and justice are major themes, and patriarchy's constantly in question. And, though their theology is a source of so much of the ensuing debates, at no point did it feel like the faith of the women was mocked or discounted. And though the kind of Christianity these women embody differs greatly from my own, there are a couple of moments that keep echoing in my brain. In one scene, a woman asks about the attacker's child another carries. She says, "Will you not hate that child? That child's the child of a man who inspires violent thoughts in you."

The other replies, "I already love this child more than anything. He or she is as innocent and lovable as the evening sun. So too was the child's father when he was born." That's what makes this movie so compelling to me. In spite of the horror, the evil, the abuse, she does not argue that her attacker *is* innocent; she argues that he once *was*. But the boys have been excellent students of the men, and that innocence gave way to a cycle of abuse ingrained in their culture. But even so, innocence was the starting point for them all. The film lays great responsibility on the entire colony, and the women suffer for it; but for an all-too-brief time, they all, to a person, were free from that perverting influence. And it's all further muddled by the theological requirement for forgiveness because to paraphrase another line, forgiveness has become confused with permission.

This will be no surprise, but the story of the Cornell 7 or 57, depending on how you determine culpability, has made the effect of that film all the more poignant. Details from Ithaca are still emerging, and some are quick to question the veracity of Jane Doe's allegations. In spite of the statistical improbability of a false accusation, our society always does this. Yes, it matters if the accusations are true, and it's incredibly unlikely that they aren't. So maybe it's worth zooming out to get away from the specifics of one story to look at how these kinds of stories tend to unfold: a woman makes an accusation, and in spite of the preponderance of evidence that says these accusations're rarely made in bad faith, our society goes right to all the ways she's wrong. Maybe she lied or wanted something from her accuser or wanted to hurt him or ruin his future or maybe she really did consent or maybe she was dressed provocatively or maybe she was asking for it or maybe it's men's right to take what they want. We've all heard these and more. Myriad reasons why it's her fault, and myriad reasons why it isn't his. Or, if it is his fault, myriad reasons why that big, strong man couldn't control his big, strong urges.

Even when courts do find men guilty, even then justice isn't guaranteed. Y'all remember the Brock Turner case? He was convicted of three felony counts of sexual assault, and served only 3 months in jail; there

was concern, you see, that a harsh sentence would be the “true” injustice because it would ruin his promising future. This story is so common, you could almost replace the names, change nothing else, and still have an accurate summation. The MeToo movement wasn’t the first time women tried to shed light on this very dirty not-so-little not-so-secret. And the new IAmJaneDoe iteration’s unlikely to be the last.

We know the Church is no innocent bystander, either. We’ve got our own long history of abuse, and as that film so incredibly portrays, our own long history of excusing abuse. That’s a fundamental misuse of our cherished religion, but that hasn’t kept predators from seeking prey wherever they can gain access. This should be basic stuff for us. The Ten Commandments in Exodus -- from misusing God’s name to justify harm to adultery to coveting someone else’s body -- and the secret faults and presumptuous sins of Psalms, those are only the beginning. Scripture has plenty of examples of sexual assault as something to be condemned, but unless you study scripture, you could be forgiven for missing ‘em given how often scripture’s deployed to enforce obedience rather than seek justice. But that’s not us. We aren’t in the business of control. We’re in the business of justice. We’re in the business of consequences. We’re in the business of forgiveness, though not as permission or as an escape from justice. We’re in the business of actual, respectful, kind, supportive, person-building love.

This is bigger than sexual assault, too. This is a man problem that’s poisoned our society as machismo, testosterone, quick tempers, and unchecked bravado continue to define what our government and a significant chunk of our population believe is right. And this patriarchal misuse of our religion’s being used to justify everything from bombing children to storing women in tents in Buffalo over the winter. Reports of widespread physical and sexual abuse in ICE concentration camps are downplayed as merely rumors or even woke, leftists, weak (read: “feminine”) ideologies threatening the foundations of Western Civilization. I want y’all to think about that for a second. If holding space for sexual assault is a defining feature of Western Civilization, maybe Western Civilization ain’t all it’s cracked up to be.

This is why our theologians spend so much time talking about justice and the *imago dei* and inclusive language and the Kingdom of Heaven and the women who saw the tomb empty first and the Deborahs and Phoebes and Esthers and Naomis and Priscillas. Because we know the human structures ruling this world are broken. We know justice isn’t universal. We know there has to be something better, and we know we can find the beginnings of better in a few basic places like the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ teachings. That’s why we’re here. Because we know there is something better, can be something better. Women Talking says, “hope for the unknown is good, it is better than hatred of the familiar.” But Paul says we should do both.