



Untold Stories

2 Samuel 13:1-21

This summer at AMC has been a summer of stories, a summer exploring the courage of princes and prostitutes, the generosity of wealthy tax collectors and impoverished widows, the faith of feisty sisters, and the selflessness of sidekick friends. Scripture is full of stories like the ones we've heard over the last 12 weeks—funny and challenging, inspiring and perplexing.

But there's also a particular selection of stories in Scripture that I'm willing to bet you've *never* heard in church. These stories are so deeply disturbed and raise such uncomfortable questions that most of us would prefer to pretend they're not in the Bible at all. This morning's story is one of this sort. That the incident occurred in the household of David, one of the greatest and most God-devoted figures in biblical history, makes it that much more unsettling.

David's son Ammon, the crown prince of Israel, has fallen in love with his half-sister, Tamar. Of course, the nature of this "love" is quickly called into question. Tamar is beautiful, and according to the narrator, what Ammon has truly "fallen into" resembles nothing so much as a fit of lustful obsession. He is a powerful man, accustomed to getting what he wants, and he wants Tamar. But Tamar is out of reach. Ammon turns it over in his mind until he's consumed with frustrated desire and determination to have what he feels is his due.

His friend Jonadab notices Ammon looking rather harassed and asks the problem. "I'm in love with *my brother Absalom's* sister Tamar," he says, with all the innocence of an unjustly suffering



Romeo. Jonadab cleverly suggests that Ammon pretend to be ill. Then when his father King David comes to check on him, he can ask his father to send his sister Tamar to spoon-feed him his dinner. And viola! They will have a chance to spend time together.

Ammon is a gifted manipulator, and David is a doting father who never imagined darkness could fall so close to home. He misses the warning signs. He doesn't hear the false ring to the sickness (cough, cough). He doesn't question Ammon's insistence on being served by Tamar's hand and hers alone. He simply sends his daughter to Ammon's room.

Ammon plays out his part to perfection. He acts slowly to avoid setting off alarms. He lets Tamar cook in his apartment, and then sends his servants away so they can "eat" in privacy. Then, counting on Tamar's inherent kindness and decency, he asks her to bring the food to his bedside to help him eat. It's only then, alone in his bedroom, that his intentions are revealed.

When Tamar realizes what it is that Ammon wants from her, she protests powerfully. "No, my brother," she says. "Don't force me." She reminds him of the values they share as Israelites under God. She reminds him of the consequences, both to her and to his reputation. She considers his interests as well as her own. She tries to put him off with an alternative. But Ammon will not be swayed. He wants what he wants when he wants it. When it's clear she will not give it willingly, he uses his superior physical strength to take what he wants by force.



The moment he is satisfied, Ammon's lust turns into loathing. He wads Tamar up and tosses her out as if she were nothing to him. He assumes fear and shame will keep her quiet, that the matter will be closed. But he has not truly *seen* Tamar or her well of inner strength. She will not be silenced. She tears her clothes, throws ashes on her head, and cries out in public mourning until no one can miss what's occurred.

On hearing her cries, her full brother Absalom suggests that Tamar quiet down and try to "get over it." Her father David is furious when he hears the news. But in the end he does nothing, to discipline Ammon or to directly address the situation at all. Because after all, as the narrator puts it, *David loves Ammon*, who is his prized firstborn son.

There are some stories that are hardly ever told, in Scripture or in life. But just because we fail to tell them doesn't mean they're rare. In the U.S. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men will be sexually assaulted at some point in their life. Globally this number grows to a staggering 1 in 3 women. 1 in 5 high school girls will suffer violence at hands of an intimate partner. 1 in 5 college women will experience rape or attempted rape. And these stats are for incidents reported; more than half are not.

Tamar's story is more 3000 years old, but it bears all the hallmarks of a story that could be and *is* unfolding today. Like Ammon's, half of sexual assaults are premeditated. Like Tamar, 80% of those assaulted know their assailant. Vulnerabilities—physical, social, or emotional—are



exploited by those in positions of power. Kindness and compassion are preyed upon. Clear ‘no’s’ are ignored. And far too often the watchers go suddenly blind and the ones who cry out are silenced.

What’s most unthinkable of all is that studies now show the incidence rate is every bit as high in the church as it is outside. How can this be? This spring preparing for a Bible study, I was reading a commentary on 2 Samuel. When I came to ch. 13 and the rape of Tamar, a simple statement by the author at the opening of the reflections set off alarms for me: “this text is not read publically in the church.” And it hit me—*we the church have been David*, the ones too close to see, the ones who wish to think that our home is the exception, who miss the signs, who fail to ask the questions, who—even when the stories cry out in our faces—tend to skirt right past them because we are afraid of what the truth might cost.

1 in 4. 1 in 9. If there is to be a change—*and in God’s name, there must be*—Tamar’s story must be told. And a community must learn to listen without running away, without closing our eyes, without drowning her cries in exceptions and excuses. When she says it happens in our house, someone must believe her. And most of all, someone must do what no one did for Tamar—ask her what she needs and sees and make safe space for an honest response.

Our summer series on “Everyday Heroes” was meant to end last week, but I feel compelled today to add one more name to the list—Tamar, the daughter of Maacah and David, and heroine of all the untold stories of the community of faith. She suffered terribly, but she is much more than a



victim; Tamar is a survivor, a woman of wise speech and courageous action who disrupts the status quo and breaks the code of silence on behalf of those who are afraid.

There are people—both women and men—here among us this morning who share Tamar’s story. The last thing I have the right to do is stand here in the pulpit and dictate to you what you must do with your truth. Each of us are in different stages of our healing journey, and your path is yours to choose. But I do want you to hear me say from the pulpit this morning that we the community of faith honor the strength and courage that has kept you going on. You’ve endured what no one should have to, and you’ve been much more than your pain. Forgive us as a household of faith for the times we’ve missed what was right before our eyes. My prayer for you is that you won’t feel you have to carry your story alone but that you will find someone safe who can help hold that story with you.

I also want to say to you that if you’ve been in our church or any other Mennonite church for a while, you’ve probably heard us talk about some of our favorite concepts—loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, carrying the cross. These ideas are core to our faith and our conviction that following the way of Jesus often means taking a costly, sacrificial path and even be willing to lay down our lives for our enemies. But please here me say this clearly this morning: sexual intimacy is not a place *ever* designed for cross-carrying. Sexual intimacy is a gift designed by God for two people to meet each other in wholeness, mutual self-giving, connection, and joy. It is meant to be a



window into God's passion for us, God's desire to be fully united with us for our joy and overwhelming good. Sexual intimacy is therefore a sacred space to God. Any use of that space that involves violence, intimidation, suffering, or shame is a fundamental violation of God's intention and a deep offense to God.

Please, please do not take Jesus' name as a reason to stay silent or to remain in a relationship that includes sexual coercion. That's the last thing God desires for you. Jesus came so that you could experience healing, fullness of life, and purposeful love. It is not his will that you submit yourself to wounding at the hands of someone who has been specially entrusted with your care. Jesus' desire for you is to follow him out into wholeness and to freedom. If you need help taking that step, please tell me or tell someone and let us walk alongside you.

I also recognize there are likely people in this room who are on the other side of this story, who at some point in their lives have exercised power or dominance in a way that violated the body and the spirit of another person. Many of you before you were perpetrators were victims yourselves and carry your own deep scars. We as your community grieve with you for that, and God grieves with you too.

But you've also been entrusted with the dangerous, God-given gift of moral choice. And at some point in your life you used that gift in a way that damaged another person, and whether you know it or not, also damaged your own spirit. These aren't the sort of damages that time and silence



ever erase. They stay; they remain until they are addressed. And no matter how deeply the secrets may be buried, they are already known by the one who matters most—the God who will ultimately draw all things into the light and into account.

You have a window of opportunity right now to do something powerful—to take responsibility for your choices and to break the cycle of damages that have a way of passing from one generation to the next. You can carry your guilt into God’s healing light instead of waiting for it to be dragged there. There is forgiveness, healing, and restoration in God, but the only path—*the only path*—is through the naming of the truth. There is no shortcut, no other way than truth, either now or in eternity.

In a moment, we are going to take a time to lament and to share communion together in a form that has been specially adapted in mindfulness of the journeys of the many Tamar’s in our midst. But before we do that, I’d like to offer you just one other possibility of response. Last summer a young woman named Rachel Harder launched a website called “Our Stories Untold” as platform for starting a conversation about sexual violence in the Mennonite church. Over the last year, many members of the Mennonite church have chosen this site as a safe place to share their own stories. I’ve placed the web address as well as its companion Facebook page on the wall behind me as well as in the bulletin. This is one possibility for a place to start at either telling your own story or



hearing the stories of others. May God bless the truth, in its telling and hearing, and may new hope be born. Amen.