

Sermon
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen
April 10, 2016
“Break the Silence Sunday”

Break the Silence

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

Sometimes, the Church (capital C Church, as in the universal institution and the people who claim to follow the way of Jesus) is asleep to evil, and in the words of a friend of mine, needs to “get woke,” and “stay woke.” Sometimes the Church closes its eyes in the face of evil, so as to convince itself it has legitimate reason not to respond. Sometimes the Church harbors evil within itself. So it is with the issue of sexual assault and violence. And, for the most part, the Church has been silent.

The Church, however, doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It exists within its larger social context, and we live in a culture that makes bodies a commodity to be exploited, especially women’s and girls’ bodies and especially the bodies of women and girls of color. As a society, we excuse, trivialize, or ignore sexual violence. “Boys will be boys,” or “she shouldn’t have been drinking,” we hear related to assaults on our college campuses. “They must be lying,” or “they should have known better,” or “they must have an ulterior motive for stepping forward,” we hear about the 55 women who have accused the celebrity of drugging and raping them¹. “Women can’t get pregnant if it was a ‘legitimate rape’²,” a politician says, and “It can’t be rape if the person doesn’t fight back,” we hear from others who want to discount a victim’s story.

Our sexual assault prevention model focuses almost exclusively on teaching people (typically women) how to avoid getting raped, rather than teaching people (primarily men) *not* to rape and, by inference, lays responsibility for the commission of the crime on the victim.

This shouldn’t be surprising. We socialize boys into patriarchy, and then shake our heads in disbelief when they assert power over a female’s body in a violent way. We socialize boys into hypermasculinity, and disbelieve that it’s possible for a boy to be raped, especially by a woman. “What normal boy doesn’t want sex?” we hear. “Rape”—a crime of power and violence is often conflated with “sex”—a gift of God to be cherished.

¹ <http://time.com/4056054/bill-cosby-sexual-assault-rape-accusers/>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/us/politics/rep-todd-akin-legitimate-rape-statement-and-reaction.html?_r=0

A phrase you may have heard is that we are living in a “rape culture.” The evidence for this stacks up:

- One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old.³
- In 8 out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knows their perpetrator.⁴
- Rape is the most under-reported crime. Overall, only 1/3 of sexual assaults are reported to the police. That statistic drops to 10% when it comes to reporting sexual abuse of a child⁵.
- Only 2 out of 100 perpetrators ever serve even a day in jail.⁶
- Additionally, 325,000 children are at risk of becoming victims of commercial child sexual exploitation each year⁷.

As heinous as these statistics are, neither the United States nor the 21st century have a corner on the market of sexual violence. Patriarchy and its resulting diminishment of the personhood of women and children, the exploitation of bodies, rape as a weapon of war, and the slave trade—both historically and in our contemporary context—is a world-wide phenomenon, and has been since recorded time.

The effects of sexual violence on its victims is enormous. Some do not survive, either because of the physical injuries themselves, or emotional injuries that lead to self-destructive behavior, including suicide. Over 80% of women report short- or long-term impacts, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.⁸ Self-blame is common in our “she (or he) was asking for it” rape culture. Feelings of a loss of control, ongoing threat, and shame often linger for one who has experienced sexual violence. In fact, inducing these feelings is a tactic often employed by perpetrators.⁹

I can cite my sources for this information about the experiences of survivors, but I could have written this sermon without consulting them. I have *lived* the experience of a sexual assault survivor. I was abused as a young child by a teenage boy whom my parents were fostering in our home. Even having experienced much healing over the years, it leaves a permanent wound. Healing comes in layers, with always more layers to uncover.

³ http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf

⁴ nsvrc.org

⁵ nsvrc.org

⁶ <https://rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates>

⁷ nsvrc.org

⁸ nsvrc.org

⁹ <http://ndvsac.org/wp-content/uploads/SA/Feelings%20Frequently%20Felt%20by%20Sexual%20Assault%20Survivors.pdf>

From my own experience and from the stories others have shared with me, it's clear that no aspect of the life of a survivor of sexual violence is untouched by the experience. The harm is not only physical and emotional, but also spiritual. Every person experiences the wounding uniquely, but there are some common threads:

- Shame can threaten to separate survivors from knowing themselves as persons deserving of God's love.
- These experiences of violence can lead people to feel as though God is either capricious or cruel.
- Some survivors suffer deep pain in feeling that God has abandoned them.
- Others have felt betrayed by pressure to forgive, even as their perpetrators are not called to account for repentance.
- And when systemic injustices that lead to sexual violence are not addressed by the Church, some survivors view the Church as uncompassionate, irrelevant, or complicit.

Even though the Church has for too long been silent about sexual violence, our faith tradition has much to say. Our origin stories themselves proclaim all of creation as inherently "good," and insist that humanity bears the image of the Divine. Our prayer book, the Psalms, proclaims that God's very hands knit us together, and that there is nowhere we can go and no circumstance we experience that puts us beyond the presence and love of God. These assurances are part of the resources we have to offer to those whose self-identity has been distorted by violence, shame, and fear.

Christianity itself is an embodied religion. If we claim that Jesus was "God incarnate"—that is, God in flesh—we must proclaim that what happens to bodies matters, profoundly. To say that God took upon Godself the vulnerability of the human experience is to say that God's flesh encounters the suffering of the human experience. In the story of Jesus we see a God who weeps for the pain of the world, is an active participant in the healing of individuals who are wounded, and speaks a prophetic and liberating word about systems that injure the well-being of any in the community.

We, as the Church, are identified as the corporate Body of Christ. As any person experiences sexual violence, the whole Body of Christ experiences sexual violence. And just as we hear in I Corinthians that the eye cannot say that it has no need of the hand nor the head say it has no need for the foot, the Body of Christ cannot say to the victims of violence, "we want you to disappear quietly." Whenever the Body of Christ communicates this, implicitly or explicitly, it fails to *be* the Body of Christ. It instead becomes another perpetrator of spiritual violence.

The Church, the Body of Christ, is called to be a restorer of hope and sanctuary of healing for all, and especially those whom society has marginalized. Those who have endured sexual violence are among the marginalized.

The Body of Christ is called to overturn the tables of our rape culture with as much passion as Jesus overturned the tables of social injustice in the Temple.

The Body of Christ is called to bear witness to the unassailable identity of each person, each body, as sanctuary of the Divine, wholly respectable and worthy of respect.

In solidarity with our sisters and brothers, may we hear and respond to this calling.

Amen.