

**(18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)**  
**Genesis 39:1-23**

Unless you have been hiding under a rock, you are aware of another sexual assault claim by a woman, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, against another politically powerful man, Judge Brett Kavanaugh. (In an interesting twist, the Senate Judiciary Committee spokesman who is helping defend these charges against Judge Kavanaugh resigned the other day because he too was previously charged with sexual harassment against a woman.)

Sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and men is not a new issue, it has just been at the forefront of our national news recently.

In 2017, Time magazine made the "Silence Breakers" of the #MeToo movement their "Person of the Year". Suffering in silence, and feeling they were alone, these women - and men finally found the courage to speak up about the abuse inflicted on them by those in power over their careers and lives.

According to statistics shared by RAINN (Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network) the leading national anti-sexual violence organization reports:

- On average, there are 321,500 victims (age 12 or older) of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States.
- Females, ages 12-34 are the highest risk years for rape and sexual assault (though it does happen to older females as well as children).
- About 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. 1 out of every 10 rape victims are male.

In his book, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, author John Krakauer deals with a young college co-ed who is date raped by a local college football star. Krakauer writes: "It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander does nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering...."

Author Fredrik Backman, in his novel, *Beartown*, which also deals with this topic, this time involving a 15-year-old high school girl who is sexually assaulted by the star hockey player Beartown, writes: "For the perpetrator, rape lasts just a matter of minutes. For the victim, it never stops."

Of course, we know sexual assault doesn't just happen by powerful political leaders or Hollywood executives or athletes.

The Church has a history of sexual abuse and not just the Catholic Church. All churches, regardless of denominational affiliation or theological beliefs have, unfortunately, come face to face with sexual abuse charges against trusted religious leaders from pastors to youth leaders to church members themselves.

When I was in my first congregation, a local clergy colleague was trying to help his congregation deal with a rape charge against a church member that had taken place in the church building against a young person. The congregation, like our nation, was deeply divided by this traumatic event.

The victims of sexual assault and sexual harassment are real human beings. They aren't people we read about in the news. They live in our own community, are our neighbors, our co-workers, attend our schools, and statistically speaking, would even attend our churches.

So why am I bring this up this morning? Because sexual assault by a person in power over another human being is part of Joseph's story too.

Sure, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice played it for laughs with a catchy song and dance number in their musical, but make no mistake, the Biblical account isn't doing so. Joseph is assaulted by Potiphar's wife, and then when he says "No" to her many advances, she accuses him of attacking her. Joseph, the victim, is punished not the perpetrator of the assault.

It would also be easy for us to leave it here and move on to the "they lived happily ever after" part of Joseph's story, humming the colorful song and dance numbers from the musical.

But if we actually read the whole of Joseph's story, we will find several accounts of rape, domestic violence, mass murder, prostitution, deception, human trafficking, and wrongful incarceration of the victims. These were parts of the Joseph narrative that Webber and Rice chose to leave out of the musical. They are also parts of the story we do not talk about in Sunday School or speak of in worship. Yet, here they are.

Remember I mentioned Jacob and Leah had one daughter, Dinah, the only sister of those eleven brothers. In Genesis 34, we hear of her being raped by a man named Shechem. The brothers plot their revenge, deceiving Shechem and his male villagers, and then kill them all.

Then just when you think you have heard it all, Judah, one of the brothers, is himself deceived by his widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar, who is barren. As was the religious law back then, if a woman was married, widowed and left barren, the next male heir in line was to get her pregnant in hopes of producing a son, not a daughter mind you, but a son. Except each of Judah's sons kept dying until he was down to his last one. Fearful of this same fate befalling his final male heir, he breaks the law, refusing to allow his son to try to get his daughter-in-law pregnant. So, she deceives Judah, dresses up like a temple prostitute, yes I said a "Temple" prostitute, tricks Judah into having sex with her. In exchange for this carnal favor, Judah gives her his ring (signet), his cord around his waist, and the staff he carried. Later when he finds out Tamar is pregnant, but not realizing the child is his, he calls her a "whore" and calls for her execution which is the punishment by the religious laws. When asked who is the one of sexually violated her, she produces Judah's own items, thus saving her life.

So now you may know way more you wanted to know about the whole Biblical account of Joseph and his family. These stories, like many others in the Bible, leave us wondering what in the world was God thinking when God created humankind? Yet maybe the better question for us to ask is "Where in this story is God?"

We struggle today with all the news about violence, sex, domestic abuse, crime, deception, lying, injustices, and broken, dysfunctional families, wondering where God is in the whole mess. But what about in our own sacred faith story in the whole of Scripture?

How am I to try to comfort you, give you hope and make promises that God is with you in this world when things we are facing today were just as prevalent in our the Bible?

Fredrick Buechner says: "Here is the world. Terrible and beautiful things will happen. Be not afraid."

The truth is, there is plenty to make us afraid and upset. Yet, maybe Buechner's words are the most important thing for us to remember - "Be not afraid".

Horrific, terrible tragedies like sexual assault, rape, gun violence like we faced in Madison this past week, domestic violence, human trafficking, abuse by those in power over trusted to their employment and care happen. God knows they shouldn't, and God knows we should also know these things should not be happening. Fearing for our own lives, reputations, and financial security, we stay silent, hoping bad things will happen to someone else and not us. But life doesn't turn out that way, just ask Joseph or Jesus.

Yet, if we do a close reading of our sacred text, following all the way along, we will find that in the midst of all the human misery, hatred, suffering, abuse, and pain we can inflict on one another, God is still with us. God message is "Be not afraid". We know that sacred love is stronger than hate. Goodness is stronger than evil. Life is stronger than death.

If we, as followers of Jesus, can hold on to this hope, we can find it in ourselves to also hold one another accountable for our human failings, providing grace and forgiveness to help heal the deep and troubling wounds sexual assault victims, allowing the grace for perpetrators of crimes to confess and learn from their sins (crimes), and allow us all to finally stop the hatred that continues to fester in our human hearts, and trust God's love to help us grow together again into the people God created us to be.

"What you meant for evil, God used for good," Joseph says to his brothers. And we do mean many things for evil against one another. Yet, in the midst of it all, God is still working in and through our messed up lives, relationships to help us become more fully aware of the healing power of loves abiding presence in each person's life and in stories.

Amen.