

Clinging To the Threshold of Hope

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Kevin E. Frederick

Scripture: Judges 19, selected passages
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Our Old Testament Passage today is a highly unusual text, not just because it deals with the graphic violence of rape and murder but because it seems to convey a message devoid of any hope or grace. Although the book of Judges is included extensively in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings of scripture for worship services, the lectionary readings conclude with the close of chapter 18. I can't recall having ever heard a sermon delivered on this text. But in my studies of relational themes throughout the scriptures, I have spent as much or more time with this passage than any throughout the Bible. I think this scripture has something to communicate to the church in a society where violence profoundly impacts the private lives of so many people.

Included in your guide to worship is a blue sheet with some statistics on domestic violence. You may want to make notes on the backside of the sheet during the sermon. Before I read from Judges 19 let me strongly suggest that you read chapters 19-21 on your own and reflect on the implications of this one man's actions on the entire nation of Israel. As I read this text, ask yourself a complex question. Why would such a passage as this be included in the canon (or the collection) of writings we know as Holy Scripture?

Judges 19

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for some four months. Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father's house the girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. His father-in-law – the girl's father — made him stay, and he remained with him three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there. On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, Fortify yourself with a bit of food and after that you may go. So the two men sat and ate and drank together and the girl's father said to the man, Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself? When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. On the fifth day he got up early in the morning to leave; and the girl's father said to him, "Fortify yourself." So they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate and drank.

When the man with his concubine and servant got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father said to him, Look the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night, and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow you can get up early in the morning for your journey. But the man would not spend the night. He got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus that is Jerusalem, (approximately two to three miles from Bethlehem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys and his concubine was with him. When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent and the servant said to his master, "Come let us turn aside to this

city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it." But his master said to him, "We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah." They turned aside there to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took him in to spend the night.

Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.) The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the open square." So he brought him into his house and fed the donkeys. They washed their feet and ate and drank. While they were enjoying themselves the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house and began pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house so that we might have intercourse with him." And the man the master of the house went outside and said to them, "No my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is a guest in my house, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do what you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." But the men would not listen to him. So the Levite seized his concubine and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As the morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

In the morning, her master got up, opened the doors to the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine laying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. "Get up," he said to her. "We are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey and the man set out for his home. When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'"

May God add meaning and understanding to the reading of this Holy Scripture.

Clinging To the Threshold of Hope

Domestic violence: one might think it to be a marginal issue in most Presbyterian faith communities . . . but it isn't. Last fall Betsy Warren, the director of Interlace, a local program designed to assist victims of domestic violence, gave a Minute for Mission for our annual Peacemaking offering. The session had voted to direct the local portion of that offering towards Interlace. Interlace is a multi-agency program designed to connect victims of domestic violence with a variety of specific services. That afternoon Betsy had three phone calls from different women that had attended worship that morning. They were calling her for help for themselves.

In my 18 years of ministry, the issue of family violence has periodically surfaced in my work. I recently served for three years on a board of directors of a shelter for women fleeing from domestic violence and I learned first hand how pervasive a factor domestic violence is in our society. More startlingly I learned of the impact misguided and untrained pastoral counseling has had; in some cases creating far greater problems for the victim, even leading to the death of one woman. If her pastor hadn't insisted that she return home to a violent husband she might still be alive today. Both the lack of specialized training for church leaders and the silence of the church

on domestic violence have contributed to the injustice done to all victims of domestic violence whether they be women, children, or in some cases, men. For all who profess Christ as Lord and Savior and who seek to follow him, his universal calling to Christians to serve “the least of these” certainly includes all victims of domestic violence.

If someone you know were to confide in you, perhaps a friend or colleague, a family member or even a child, and tell you they were suffering in an abusive relationship, would you know how to respond? Would you know where to point them for help and would you know that the assistance they receive would be beneficial? It is time that we all break the code of silence and educate ourselves regarding this issue and communicate in a clear voice the will of Christ for all families, the most intimate of human relationships.

Lets turn to the scripture text for some help with this issue. “In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what they thought was right in their own eyes.” This frequent refrain found throughout the book of Judges including to a partial degree here at the beginning of chapter 19 and completely at the close of chapter 21, communicates the basis of the problem in the entire nation of Israel. Each male looked to himself as being the defining authority on right and wrong. In so doing the whole nation disregarded the Law of Moses. The story of the Levite and his concubine serves both as an example of the social deterioration of a whole nation and as an illustration of themes found in distorted family relationships today.

Levite is a term used to describe members of the tribe of Levi, a people set aside by God, called to provide religious leadership to the nation of Israel. They served as priests, scribes and other religious officials for the whole nation and as a result could not possess land of their own. It is with intentional irony that the Bible presents this Levite, a religious official, at the center of an ethical and moral breakdown of the Hebrew people.

The woman in this story is called a concubine, which is a confusing term for us. Some of us might think of her as a prostitute or a kept woman, at least a woman with a disreputable character. And yet the Levite is both referred to as her husband and as the son-in-law of the woman’s father. Why? There is a marital relationship of some sort here and we learn that in Hebrew society the term concubine referred to a wife of secondary status. In ancient Israel a husband was given the right to remarry if he and his first wife were unable to conceive a child. For example, Abraham’s relationship with Hagar while still married to Sarah, was that of a husband with a second wife, or a concubine. We understand the dynamics of this text more readily if we refer to her as a second wife. Some scholars have suggested that the second wife was at fault in this relationship and left her husband after being unfaithful to him but the text seems to suggest another interpretation.

She had left him angry, four months earlier, and now he wanted to woo her back with tender talk. But this biblical phrase “to speak tenderly to her” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament between the man Shechem and a young girl named Dinah who Shechem had raped and than later tried to woo with tender talk towards marriage. In Judges the strategy of wooing his wife seems to indicate that the Levite had been at some sort of fault, not she. Experts in the field of domestic violence have identified a cycle of violence between an abusive husband and his wife, there is a violent explosion followed by a courtship phase using gifts, apologies, promises and charming behavior until the wife forgives the husband. Then he soon returns to abusive behavior. It is a very predictable pattern in abusive relationships. But domestic violence is not a matter of anger management. It is first and foremost a matter of power and control where one spouse exercises

coercive control over the life and well being of the other. In well over 95 percent of reported cases of domestic violence the perpetrator is the male.

The Levite sets out in our story after his second wife to woo her back but when he arrives at her father's home he is diverted away from talking with her by the father's lavish expression of hospitality. The concept of biblical hospitality is central to Hebrew thinking. It is essentially based on a biblical and cultural code of ethics between men, designed to build and strengthen relationships. In our story hospitality is shared between the father-in-law and the husband in the form of a three-day indulgence in food and drink that extends into a fourth and even a fifth day at the father-in-law's insistence. But the offering of hospitality is noticeably absent towards the woman in this story. So is the Levite's intended tender talk.

Notice there is no mention of dialogue between the husband and his second wife. She remains without voice throughout this ordeal in a matter that affects her whole future. Very often today in cases of domestic violence the voice of the woman is not allowed to be heard. When couples counseling is relied on to resolve issues between the two parties, the husband's voice is the dominant voice. The wife cannot speak freely or candidly about her situation for fear of reprisal at a later time. Using couples counseling as a therapeutic response to domestic violence only further obscures the truth, leaving the perpetrator satisfied that the problem is not his and the victim more confused and frustrated that her issues and difficulties with the marriage have been silenced.

Too often the institutions designed to help intervene in cases of domestic violence are rendered ineffective by the code of silence including law enforcement, the legal, the therapeutic and the religious communities. As a result even in a communications based society as technologically advanced as ours, we have only begun to effectively address the code of silence impacting victims of domestic violence. Add to this the knowledge that the United States now refuses to sign a United Nations treaty adopted by 170 nations which addresses all forms of discrimination against women. Although the USA helped to draft this document twenty-three years ago we today still refuse to sign it along with three other holdout nations, Iraq, Iran and the Sudan; not good company. On at least one level, this is due to the rise in conservative religious paternalism in each of these four countries including our own.

When the Levite finally gets up to leave his father-in-law's hospitality and return home, the whole matter is settled. He has made up his mind. He gathers his property including his slave and his concubine and heads off late in the day, a time most unwise for a traveler in an unsafe land. He chooses to stop at the well of town of the tribe of Benjamin thinking himself safe there and is welcomed in the home of an old man who came from his homeland of Ephraim. The old man extends to this stranger biblical hospitality. During the evening the men of the town, fellow Jews from the tribe of Benjamin gather outside the home and forcefully demand that the Levite traveler be sent outside so that they might have intercourse with him. But the master of the house went out to speak with the men of the town. "No my brothers, this man is my guest. Do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want with them but against this man, do not do this vile thing." But the men would not listen.

This sense of justice offends our sensibilities and rightly so. But these were distorted times in Israel. Here again as repeatedly throughout the three-chapter story we see the underlying refrain of this book illustrated: "In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what they thought was right in their own eyes." Here biblical hospitality becomes completely distorted and

the old man who is most gracious to the stranger thinks it just to offer his own daughter and this woman to the violence of evil men in defense of the stranger.

In an effort to protect himself, the Levite seizes his concubine and throws her out the door. The Hebrew word here for “seize” implies a forceful action and is most often a verb used to describe complete control over an object. Here it is used with a human being, only one of few examples where this verb found in the Bible is used to describe a controlling force against the will of another person. She has become a dispensable sacrifice used as a substitute to protect the Levite. She is raped, violated by a crowd of men all night and towards morning is finally left alone. She staggers back to the door of the home where they are staying and the Bible says, “falls down at the door of the house where her master was, until it was light.” Notice there is no reference to him any more as being a husband; rather he is referred to with the title of a property owner of animals and slaves. He is her master. After handing over his wife, one would hope that the Levite was racked by guilt, shame or remorse, but there is no hint of that in the text. He appears to get a good night’s rest and in the morning he doesn’t even rush out to find her. In fact, only after the Levite has made provisions to leave, only at the last minute does he open the door to go on his way. Only then does he find his concubine, his wife, with her hands on the threshold. It seems ironic that in a culture so focused on biblical hospitality that none would be offered to this woman. Hospitality is as closed to her as is the door to security, the door to compassionate care and solace, the door of hope, the door to a healthy marriage. In a land where there is no king, where every man interprets truth for himself, biblical hospitality is even denied to a wife.

How far we have fallen O Israel, and yet the joyous response of Adam at the first sight of his partner, Eve, still echoes in our ears. This alas is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. God had created woman to be man’s partner but the Levite, the religious leader, treated her as disposable property, this God-given gift created in God’s own image. In a land where there is no King, the text suggests that the Levites’ sins were far greater than the men of the town.

This poor woman, who had suffered the worst brutal savagery of her life; this woman had no one to come to her aid. She had been betrayed by her husband, who days before had the intention of wooing her back to him, now she had no where to turn to and literally clung to the only hope for life that she had left, the threshold of a stranger where her master was staying. One might think that now would be a prime opportunity to go out to her to speak tenderly to her but no compassion is expressed. “Get up!” he commands callously, “we are going.” But there is no answer, so he put her on a donkey and proceeded to return to his home where her body is grossly violated by dismemberment to build his case of wrongdoing done to him before the entire nation of Israel. In this last violent act, the Levite uses her body to communicate to the eleven other tribes how he had been violated by the tribe of Benjamin. From beginning to end this nameless woman is a victim with no voice, a victim with no choices; except between her husband and her father, the two primary men in her life. The unnamed concubine in this story is a metaphor for all the nameless women who silently suffer and endure public and private abuse in every society including our own. Her story is important for all women whose fate is determined by wrongdoing men.

So where is the hope? It is not found in the book of Judges but it is found with the turn of the page, when in the book of Ruth we see faith in God and love of family redefined. Hope is found in the fact that the church and to some degree our society is waking up to the call to serve as Christ’s body to women who have been abused, both within the community of faith and beyond the doors of the church.

The covenant of marriage is a biblical promise of great significance to God and God's people. But the church must recognize that domestic violence violates not only the victim, but damages and destroys the covenant of marriage itself and impacts the whole community in negative terms. A choice to preserve the covenant of marriage at the expense of the well being of the victim discounts the sanctity of human life. Abuse in any form is a violation of God's will for humanity, especially for the abused individual who was created in God's image but also for the humanity of the perpetrator. When abuse is physical, it damages the body of another in some cases crippling the victim for life and possibly resulting in death. When abuse is sexual, it distorts the victim's sense of self and their perception of the purpose of sexuality as a sacred gift of God. When abuse is expressed through economic coercion, it creates a distorted dependency of the victim on the perpetrator as the sole source of well-being. Abuse in all its forms is emotionally damaging, destroying an individual's self esteem, potentially scarring their psyche for life. Domestic violence in all its forms instills fear as the predominant emotional state of slavery in the life of the victim. That is far from the will of God.

The church has participated, consciously or not, in a code of silence regarding domestic violence. It is time to break that pattern and to respond with a clear direction and hope not just to the victim but also to the perpetrator who seeks to be accountable for his actions. Your Session is currently involved in reviewing a document for adoption, that includes a policy statement, an action plan of response and an educational strategy designed for our staff and membership comprehensively responding to cases of domestic violence as they occur. There is also a more proactive strategy to educate the congregation helping all its families become healthier, more loving and joy filled. We will keep you posted as to the progress of this policy statement and the implementation of a training program designed to instill positive family dynamics in every church member home. (This positive dimension of family life will be the focus of next Sunday's sermon.)

May God open our hearts and lives as together we seek to be a light of hope to all families especially those impacted by violence.