

Tamar's Story  
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Would you be willing to listen to a story that began with these words?

Let me tell you about shame.

Let me tell you about betrayal.

Let me tell you about wondering if God loves you.

Let me tell you about being in a marginalized body.

Hear Tamar's story.

Found in 2 Samuel, chapter 13, this is a narrative about family. Tamar, daughter of the king has two brothers and right from the start we understand that this family has a secret.

As the narrative begins, even the way the text is framed puts the sister between two brothers, the woman between two men. Tamer is the central focus but Tamar is not the most important thing in the text.

Amnon, the text says, desires his virgin sister Tamar. Not just an interesting detail It is important to note the text says that Tamar was a virgin. She is to be protected by her male relatives. Or rather, her virginity is to be protected, as what's important about Tamar is not herself as a person, but because she is a virgin who will eventually belong to a man. It is up to her male relatives to present her as unspoiled goods. She is a virgin, she is protected and perhaps this is what sickens her brother.

Because her brother Amnon is also a child of the king. Because he's a son, he outranks his sister. Even though he is a child of privilege and of privileged gender, he knows what he should not do. Or he should.

Because you see, from the very beginning of the institution of the monarchy in Israel, the king and the kings family has some pretty important stipulations. We find them in Deuteronomy. The king, and presumably the king's heirs, are not to pursue power or wealth or many wives. They are to protect the marginalized. They are to promote justice. They are to institute gods justice, love and care.

Amnon is sick. Is he sick with lust, sick with desire, or sick with power? I would suggest that Amnon's true sickness, his true illness, is that of power. Power that is invested in him because he is a privileged class person. Power invested in him because he is a man.

Now, some would read other biblical texts about gender and gender roles and say, "Why yes of course the man is supposed to have more power than the woman. Of course the man is

supposed to be in charge of his sister's daughter's wife. Isn't that the way God created the world? Isn't that the way God ordained it?"

But then we come to this text, this text, as Phyllis Tribble names it, of terror.

Up to this point, we can almost believe that Tamar will be safe, because Amnon knows what he must not do. He knows what he is thinking is wrong. And yet. And yet.

Even though he knows it is wrong at some point he rationalizes. How does he come to this rationalization? Is it because he's used to getting his way? Is it because no one ever says no to the son of the king? Is it because his culture has told him that whatever he wants he gets? Is this son of the king entitled to everything that he wants?

Enter Jonadab, the crafty cousin. The text tells us Jonadab is a friend, son of Ahimeah, brother David. Another male relative of the king, another person with power and privilege. When we meet Jonadab, we may briefly wonder if Jonadab will reprimand his cousin and be the protector of Tamar. It's almost like when you watch a movie, even a movie that you've seen before so you know what is going to happen - you suspect what is coming but you hope that it will be otherwise.

Jonadab recognizes Amnon's stature. "O, son of the king, why are you so haggard?" And Amnon does not beat around the bush. "I love Tamar..." but you see what he does here - he distances himself from her. I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister. It is true that Absalom and Tamar are full siblings, and yet Amnon is clearly aware of the boundaries he is supposed to respect.

Jonadab puts the plan into place... he tells Amnon to pretend to be sick and to call for his sister.

How many instances of sexualized assault do we hear about on the news, read about? How many instances do we read or hear about where there is more focus on what the victim did wrong that caused her (and it usually is her) assault, rather than a focus on how perpetrators are socialized to believe they can act with impunity.

"Lie down on the bed and pretend to be ill, and when your father comes to see you, send for Tamar." Jonadab orchestrates a scenario that has Amnon using all of the relationships at his disposal to get what he wants. Amnon lets the king see him sick, in need. Of course he will do what he can to help his son.

And so David sends Tamar in to tend to Amnon, to help make him feel better. Tamar's body, in this moment, is offered up as a sacrifice to her half brother. She was probably concerned for Amnon, happy to do whatever she can to ease his illness. David loves his son. Does he love his daughter? Probably. And sending her in to Amnon is a very reasonable thing to do.

Why does Amnon, the son of the king, desire Tamar? Why Tamar, when presumably he can have any woman he wants? Is this really about a power struggle between these two sons of David? Is this another episode of biblical sibling rivalry, a rivalry between two powerful men, with a disposable woman at the center?

So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."

And we know what happens next.

Every 2 minutes, a woman or girl in the U.S. is sexually assaulted. Nearly half of the victims are under the age of 18, and over half of these assaults are never reported. Most of the assaults are committed by someone who is known by, and is close to, the victim.

For one week during each school year, clotheslines festooned with colorful t-shirts are displayed on college campuses around the country. From a distance, the t-shirts – colorful and bright – look celebratory. The shirts wave in the air like flags announcing a festival. Upon closer inspection, it is clear these t-shirts tell a different kind of story. They are the narratives of women who have been sexually assaulted. The t-shirts are emblazoned with words, quotes and images from survivors of violence. Some shirts bear the words of friends, partners and allies who tell the story for those who cannot speak, or who did not survive. "I was just a little girl." "No means No!" "You were supposed to protect her." "I am strong and beautiful. I am a survivor."

Tamar is introduced as Absalom's beautiful sister. Hebrew narrative is characteristically very sparing - no detail is meant to go unnoticed, and so it seems significant that she is described, from the moment we meet her, as beautiful. She is also a virgin. Her beauty "tormented" her brother Amnon. Amnon's friend Jonadab helps Amnon hatch a plan to help trick Tamar into his bedroom.

Tamar's story is not far-fetched at all – for many women, it is perilously close to their own experiences. Women and girls are socialized to believe that physical beauty is our most important attribute. When a woman is assaulted, she bears the risk of being blamed for the assault because of how she was dressed, that she "came on" to the assailant, or that she had a relationship with him before. The myth of being raped by the stranger in the bushes is just that – a myth. Women and children who experience sexual assault and rape are far more likely to be victimized by someone they know well – a trusted family friend, a teacher or counselor, a relative. When the assault is at the hands of someone known to and trusted by the family, it makes it that much harder for the victim to tell; and to be believed.

In Tamar's case, she is believed, but she is not vindicated immediately. King David does not punish Amnon because "he loved him, for he was his firstborn." Amnon's privilege as a male, and as a son of the king, allows him to do whatever he wants – even rape his sister.

I wish we could say we live in a world where we have solved the problem of violence. I wish we lived in a world where I could be certain no one I knew was in danger of being exploited. But we know this is not the case.

We also know that we are called by the God who created us, who created Tamar, and who created and called David the king, his sons and his daughters, to shalom.

We are called to shalom. Wholeness. In mind, body and spirit. God created us for wholeness, and yet we are broken. Our tendency to worship human power and privilege, or at the very least to look the other way, contributes to that brokenness. Broken relationships, broken spirits, broken bodies.

Beloved siblings, it is our right to be whole.

Hear Tamar's story. Let her story be a reminder that privilege and power have devastating effects on marginalized bodies.