

“Speak to Her Heart”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Judges 19:1-30  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on September 30, 2018

*(Special note and content warning: This Sunday we wrap up our sermon series on women in the book of Judges. We’ve diverted from the lectionary readings these past weeks because otherwise these stories from Judges would never be heard in the context of worship. Today we read what is arguably the most horrific story in the entire Bible (Judges 19:1-30), a story that depicts gang rape and graphic violence. If you find yourself feeling distressed, please take deep breaths and be sure to take care of yourself.)*

Like Jephthah’s daughter, her name is not known to us. This woman whose body was handled by every tribe of Israel somehow remains nameless though she must have been the most talked-about woman in the nation. He shipped her parts through the postal service like a mass mailing. Before the days of the printing press, he used her flesh and bone and made a tabloid out of her. Can you imagine anybody who *wasn’t* talking about her? “I heard the tribe of Gad got her feet and ankles. The tribe of Reuben received her left arm. Judah got the head.”

It sounds utterly disgusting and totally inappropriate for dinner table talk, but you know as well as I that people are drawn to scandal like bees to honey. Everyone was talking about her, even if they didn’t know her name either. It’s hard to ignore the bloody stump of a leg that shows up on the village doorstep after all. She was known and examined and discussed by all, yet not really known at all. Like I said, we don’t even know her name.

What we do know is that she is the concubine or the second wife of a Levite man. Levites, you may remember, are supposed to be special men, set apart for God. She, on the other hand, is less than even the wife of a Levite—she is secondary, added later, whether for children or for pleasure or both. He owns her.

Thus the beginning of her story is really quite remarkable because *she leaves him*. If you think divorce is hard now, try being a woman in ancient Israel. Leaving was not an option for women in those days, but somehow—we don’t know how—she *makes* it an option for herself. When the story begins, she is a very independent woman. Why she left depends on which ancient manuscript you read. The Hebrew and Syriac claim she played the harlot while the Greek and Old Latin say that she became angry and left.<sup>1</sup> The Common English Bible I read today translates it, “In an act of unfaithfulness toward him, his secondary wife left him.” Whatever the reason, she has to travel a great distance (alone probably) to return to the one place she might be safe after leaving her husband—her father’s house.

She stays with her father for four full months, but after all that time has passed, her husband decides he wants her back. Our translation today says he “set out after her to convince her to come back,” but a better translation of the Hebrew would be to say he set out to “speak to her

heart.” Scholar Phyllis Tribble notes “the words ‘to speak to her heart’ connote reassurance, comfort, loyalty, and love.”<sup>ii</sup>

However, once he arrives at her father’s house, the only conversation that occurs is between the two men. The father appears to extend hospitality to the husband but then he keeps extending it—almost obnoxiously. The husband stays five days and it takes eight verses out of thirty—more than a quarter of the story just to hear about two men eating a lot! We don’t know if the father is trying to delay his daughter’s departure or maybe bargain somehow so as to ensure her better treatment, but some kind of contest is happening between them.<sup>iii</sup> It’s unclear what the two men are actually fighting over, but it’s clearly not about who has to eat the leftovers. Something is at stake. We don’t know what, but ultimately the father loses the fight and the husband departs—only now it is late in the day and there is no way they can make it home by nightfall. They will have to stop.

There is still no conversation between the Levite and his concubine-wife but his servant suggests to him they stay the night in a Jebusite city. The Levite does not want to stay among foreigners, probably out of concern for their safety, and so they travel on to Gibeah. Only they sit in the city square unattended. No one offers them a place to stay.

Finally along comes an old man from the Ephraim highlands who now lives in Gibeah. The Levite is also from the Ephraim highlands so they have an immediate connection, and the old man invites them to stay. From here the story quickly grows horrific. As they are relaxing as guests in the old man’s home, men of the city surround the house and pound on the door. Like the attempted gang rape of Lot’s visitors at Sodom and Gomorrah, these men demand access to the main guest—the man. Remember, rape is about power, not sex, so they desire to conquer what will make them feel most powerful. They do not ask for any of the women or any of the male servants. They want the head of the party. They want to prove they can take whatever they want whenever they want it.

But the old man pleads with them, “No! Please don’t commit such an evil act, given that this man has come to my home as a guest. Don’t do this disgraceful thing,” or, in the RSV translation, “this vile thing.” Then he says this: “Here is my daughter . . . and his secondary wife. Let me send them out, and you can abuse them and do whatever you want to them.” Actually, more literally, what he says is this: “Ravish them, and do to them the good in your eyes.” Remember the line from our last Judges story? “In those days, there was no king in Israel; every one did what was good in his own eyes.”

Now listen, I’m not going to suggest that the old man made this offer without pain in his heart. I’m not suggesting he wanted to do this or that it was easy for him. Hell, it was quite possibly gut-wrenching. He was a father, for Pete’s sake, and by all accounts thus far, a good and generous man.

But notice the contrast in his speech. What the men want to do to his male guest? He calls it vile and evil. When he offers the two women, he invites the men to ravish them, saying, “Do what is good in your eyes.” Evil. Good. Same act. Different victims.

This, my friends, is why men and not just women need to be liberated from patriarchy too, because it was his *sense of hospitality*—not his perverseness—that made him willing to sacrifice his daughter. He thought he was choosing a lesser evil—a moral logic which only works if the wider worldview says women are lesser, and accepts it as fact. That means he was a good-hearted man caught in an evil system, making evil choices he thought were good ones. He thought he was protecting his guest and doing right by him.

Let's pause on the old man here because the vast majority of men I know *are* him. They are kind and generous and hospitable and resistant to evil-doers, but if it comes down to a choice between protecting the person with more power, protecting his fellow man, or defending the marginalized woman, he will choose the preservation of the brotherhood over the dignity of women nearly every time. Feminists have a term for this brother. He is called the Benevolent Patriarchy. It's the nice guys who think they care, and they *do* care until their own necks are on the line or their brother's neck is on the line and then suddenly the Good Old Boys Club matters more than justice, matters more the woman or women right in front of his face who are suffering.

Now while I am on the subject of uncomfortable truth-telling, let me also note that the vast majority of white women often don't behave any better towards women of color than the old man behaves. So this isn't a finger-pointing session; I'm guilty too, but the Scriptures tell me that truth has the power to set us free and so I have committed myself to seeing and knowing the truth, even when, especially when, the truth indicts me.

The old man tries to distract the mob of men, but he is unpersuasive. Next, the Levite, seeing that the words and promises aren't working, does the only thing he can think of doing that might distract them from their target . . . he gives them a body, a human body. He shoves her outside and slams the door behind her before anyone can gain a foothold inside. And it works! His plan works. The evil men leave him alone. He is safe.

The same cannot be said for her. She is raped and abused all night long, until daybreak when they finally release her. She returns to the old man's house, probably because she has nowhere else to go, and she collapses at the doorstep.

When her husband gets up in the morning—because somehow he was able to sleep—the text says he “opened the doors of the house and went outside to set out on his journey” as if he was prepared to leave without her. Only there at the entrance of the house she lies, interrupting his departure, her fingers clutching the doorframe—reaching for that door that separated her from safety.

“Get up,” he says, “Let's go.” These are the first words—and the only words—he speaks to her in this story. Remember how he went to his father-in-law's house to “speak to her heart” to convince her to come back? But this is all he ever says: “Get up. Let's go.” Lots of woo, that one. How did he get from wanting to woo her back to being willing to throw her to the wolves and leave without her? Had he convinced himself she deserved it? When he sees her, he does not rush to her side. He simply demands, “Get up.”

But she makes no response. Perhaps we are to assume she has died, but the narrator is not clear about that. We don't know if she is passed out or unable to speak because of the pain or if she is dead. What we know is that without ceremony or any show of grief or remorse, he picks her up, takes her home, and chops up her body with a knife. He sends her pieces to the twelve tribes of Israel, after which everyone says, "Has such a thing ever happened or been since? Consider, take counsel, and speak!" Only the word "consider" is a translation of the Hebrew idiom, "Direct to the heart," followed by "to her."<sup>iv</sup> In other words, they witness her mutilated body and say, "Speak to her heart, take counsel, and speak."

And for a brief moment, I feel this glimmer of hope that the nation will do what the husband failed to do—that even though her life is gone, they will still find a way to speak to her heart.

But my hopes are quickly dashed. Because this is how Israel responds: with war. They go to war against the Benjaminites, the tribe from whom the rapists came, and ten of thousands of soldiers are slain on both sides. It gets worse. Israel eventually wins out against the Benjaminite tribe, and they massacre their city—all the people, women, children, even animals. Only six hundred men escape. It gets worse. After the war is over, the Israelites realize the poor Benjaminites are left with no way to procreate, because everyone in their tribe is dead except six hundred men. And so to remedy this tragedy, they slaughter all the people in Jabesh-Gilead except for the virgins, and then they give the remaining 400 virgins to the lonely Benjaminites. It gets worse. There were only 400 hundred virgins in Jabesh-Gilead and there are 600 Benjaminite men, so if you do the math, they need 200 more. So, to remedy that, they abduct 200 women from Shiloh. In other words, the rape of one quickly escalates into the rape of 600, not to mention the slaughter of thousands more. And this is how the book of Judges ends. No redemption. No reconciliation. No resurrection. The book concludes, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

There is nothing left to do with this story but to write the next chapter ourselves. There is nothing left to do but to speak to her heart ourselves since no one else would. My friends, do not run from this story because it is uncomfortable and agonizing. Pledge to see the arenas in our own times where this story still plays out. You may think this story is far removed from our own, but it is not. When I think of her body chopped into pieces, I think of every victim of assault who has ever tried to tell what has happened to her, and the way we tear her story to shreds, looking for holes. When I think of her husband cutting her up like that, as if she hasn't already been through enough, I think of the way survivors must get rape kits for proof, which feels like being violated all over again. I think of how re-telling the story can be as traumatizing as living it, and bonus: when you tell it, there's often an audience to drive home your feelings of humiliation and to cast suspicion and doubt onto your reality. I think about the internet and how easy it is to chew someone up and spit them back out, how cyber bullying and trolling make the experience of telling your truth all the more excruciating because you can't talk about it without being abused. And if you stay quiet, they abuse you for that too. *Why didn't you speak up sooner?* When I think about her death, I think about how many victims never get to tell their own stories, either because they don't live to tell it or because the media or the abuser or the family mis-tells the story for them. When I think about her failed attempt to leave her husband, I think about how hard it is to leave and stay away, even when you might be safer on your own. I think about how impossible it can be to really get away, to recover your own worth in a culture that refuses to

acknowledge it. I think about how real her story is today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I implore you, please, do not just walk away. I think about how Ruth and Naomi, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, were all contemporaries of this unnamed concubine-wife—women who lived during the period of Judges and were seen and heard by God and by their communities. This tells me that horror and honor can coexist in the same place. We can live in a time where some women have more opportunity than women have ever had before, AND some women are brutalized and terrorized on a daily basis. Most women are caught somewhere in-between. Do not run away from seeing her reality. My friends, speak to her heart.

Speak to her heart in this way: believe her. Understand it is not your job to cross-examine. Believe her. I'm not saying that if you are on a jury in a courtroom you should ignore any evidence against her. I'm saying if she comes to you in private looking for a confidant, believe her. I'm saying, if you hear her testimony second-hand or in the public forum, believe her. At the very least, don't victim-blame her, don't shame her, don't chop her to pieces. If you have your doubts, at the very least, don't say them out loud. Because even if she is part of the two to seven percent of false accusers—and she likely isn't—even if she is, what you say about her will be overheard by other survivors, and they will hear your doubt of her as doubt of them and they will take note that you are not safe to tell their stories to. They will hear your doubt of her and for some, it will trigger longstanding PTSD symptoms. You won't know it, but your comment will be what sends her to the therapist's office this week—that is, if she's lucky and can afford a therapist, if she's lucky and actually found a good one, if she didn't choose an easier but more destructive form of coping instead.

Speak to her heart. Speak to her heart by listening. God has not called you to be a commentator on other people's trauma. Speak to her heart by seeing that she has one and knowing that it bleeds. It is not your story to cut up and dissect. Her story is not for your entertainment. She is not an intellectual exercise. She is not your debate topic or your dinner gossip; she is a person. You are not the expert on her life, on what she should or could have done or should or could do now. You will never be the expert. It is her story and her life; she is the expert. Speak to her heart by not speaking at all, unless you have something healing to say. And don't assume you know how to speak a healing word either. Listening is always a good option; just don't make her talk if she doesn't want to.

Speak to her heart. Speak to her heart by respecting and honoring her pain. Do not call her emotional or extreme or too late or irrational or hysterical or over-the-top. Tell her she is a sane person dealing with insane circumstances. If you can't see that, you're the crazy one.

Speak to her heart by refusing to excuse violence. Do not say, "Boys will be boys" or "We all did stupid things in high school." All of us may have done stupid, but some of us did assault, and if you assaulted someone, stop conflating it with stupidity. Start calling it what it is and start making amends. Look, I get it that our culture sends all sorts of wrong messages to boys about what it means to be a man, and how to pursue a woman and not take "no" for an answer. The culture does not honor consent or make it sexy, so it is hard work to get beyond the cultural messaging and find a different way to be. But just because the culture encourages rape and promotes coercion, that doesn't make men not guilty. What it means is that patriarchy and rape culture are real and pervasive and invasive, and it's not just that it could or might affect you. It

has affected you. Rape culture and patriarchal thinking are imbedded in your psyche; they are the air you breathe when you wake up in the morning, and if you can't see that, that poison will stay inside you harming you and others until the day you die. Speak to her heart by making a lifetime commitment—because I guarantee you it will take a lifetime—to confront the sexism that lives and breathes in you. The best bet your children and grandchildren have to overcoming the toxicity of sexism is to see the ongoing work of liberation practiced and modeled in you as you set yourself free one revelation, one choice, one repentance at a time.

My friends, speak to her heart. Don't let the story end here. Write a new chapter. Speak to her heart. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Fortress 1984), 66.

<sup>ii</sup> Trible, 67.

<sup>iii</sup> Koala Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21" *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield 1993), 175-176.

<sup>iv</sup> Trible, 81.