

DRAFT: DO NOT DUPLICATE OR DISTRIBUTE

IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?

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Restoring the Dignity of Women and Girls

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Saturday morning I sat down to my coffee and newspaper and the headline: “Infatuated Man Shoots, kills Teacher.” Jennifer Paulson was a special ed teacher, 30 years old. Her killer knew her from college although they never had a relationship. He had been stalking her for 4 years. She had done everything she could: telling him no, restraining orders. He had been arrested for violating the restraining order but was out on bail. As she walked from her car to the school Friday morning, he shot and killed her.

I expect that sometime in the past week each of you could have read about a domestic violence homicide, a sexual assault, the doctor now accused of molesting hundreds of his child patients. Or the rape of women in the Congo and other places of warfare; female genital mutilation continuing to be practiced; women and children trapped in sexual slavery. The list goes on every day, every week, in every community.

So what does this have to do with us as women of faith?

In Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, we meet Celie, a 14 year old African American girl who writes letters to God because she has no one else to talk to. In the opening scene of the novel, Celie's stepfather is raping her. "He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

But I don't never get used to it." Walker goes on to tell Everywoman's story of violence and abuse. But also of survival, healing and restoration.

"But I don't never get used to it." Why not? why does Celie never get used to being abused? Why does she continue to write letters to God in her struggle with profound theological questions?

Later on Celie is arguing with her friend Shugg about God. Celie points out: "... the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown." Shug says: "... you better hush. God might hear you." Celie replies:

“Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.”

Like I said, profound theological questions.

How does Celie survive and find healing and hope? How do any of us? We who are here today have survived. And we hold in our memories so many other women who did not survive the violence in their families and communities.

As women of faith, what do we know about not only surviving but about healing and hope?

Gilead was a place of evil and iniquity. Where people had turned away from God.

Jeremiah, the prophet poses the question: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? . . . O that my eyes were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! O that I had a shelter in the desert that I might leave my people and go away from them!”

Jeremiah looks around him and bemoans the fact that all he sees is violence and oppression.

And if we look at our sacred texts, we could find justification for violence and oppression, esp. domestic terror.

“Wives be subject.....”, “God hates divorce.....”, “Shalom Bayit” “Honor your father and mother” “the bible says you must forgive. . . “ “the Quran says you may beat your wife.”

These are the classic and frequently misused texts and teachings that continue to trap women and children in abusive homes. We call them roadblocks to ending domestic terror. And every faith tradition has its roadblocks.

We could spend several days together deconstructing the misinterpretations of our sacred texts that have been used for centuries to justify and encourage the abuse of women and children. To justify slavery. Even to day to encourage and support the abuse of gay and lesbian people.

Rather today I would suggest that we consider the biblical resources that call to us to see and address domestic terror, sexual assault and child abuse: because it is our faith that calls us to this work. The resources that give courage and strength to victims of abuse. The resources that call abusers to repent.

So when Jeremiah asks: **is there a Balm in Gilead for victims of domestic terror?**

The African American spiritual unequivocally answers Jeremiah's question: "There IS a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There IS a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul."

There IS a medicine in religion to bring healing and justice to those victimized by domestic terror.

I want to talk today about the problem and experience of violence against women and children; the intersection with religious traditions and practices; and the possibilities for our future together.

I speak today as a Christian pastor, an Anglo American of some degree of privilege and as one whose vision is limited by my particularity. But with you today, most importantly, I speak as a woman of faith and I hope that this common factor among us will help to reach across our particularities to share the deepest concerns of our hearts.

I was called to this ministry 35 years ago. God laid this burden on my heart, the silence of women and children who had been abused. I had no idea what to do or where to go with this. I was just finishing seminary and I did know that our churches were filled with women so this seemed a logical place to be. as I began my parish ministry, I just began to talk about violence and abuse. I recall sitting at dinner with a group of women at a church retreat. Eight of us around a table. They knew that I had just finished seminary and were asking about what I would be doing. So I said that I was interested in addressing women's experiences of abuse and violence. Silence around the table. I looked up and every woman's eyes were staring at her plate of food. Then one at a time, they raised their heads and began to tell their stories. Every woman at that table had a story about their mother, their sister, their daughter or themselves. And none had ever spoken about these things in church before.

My call to ministry was confirmed that day. God had made plain what I needed to be doing.

So let me ask you.

If you or someone in your family is a survivor of battering or rape or sexual abuse, please stand.

If you know a co-worker or neighbor or member of your faith community who is a survivor . . .

If you aren't standing, please stand now because you do know someone . . .

Our call to this work of ending violence against women in and through our faith communities is confirmed here today.

I began to hear those voices as a seminarian and young pastor. As a rape crisis volunteer, I spoke with victims and survivors who wanted to talk with their faith leader but were afraid, for good reason, to try. As a pastor, I would bring up the subject of violence against women with my congregants to a response of silent knowing looks. In the US, the gap between newly organized advocacy services for victims and the victim's faith community was huge. The fact that a victim or survivor would probably have to choose between these two resources was unacceptable. The fact that many battered women and children heard the justification of their abuse preached from the pulpit was unacceptable. The fact that clergy husbands were sometimes the abusers was unacceptable. The fact that scripture was casually used to deny women and children the right to say "no" to abuse was unacceptable. The fact that too often women and children were cut off from the spiritual resources of their faith tradition was unacceptable.

Violence against women is the common, shared experience of women across ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, ability, and faith tradition. We women share either the fear or the memory of personal violence or both. This is the first fact of life that girls learn, implicitly or explicitly. The commonplace reporting of individual incidents of personal violence or of hate

crimes against women in public reinforces our awareness that the threat of violence is in the air we breathe.

This is partly why we don't talk about it. We generally don't discuss the air we breathe unless we are focusing on air pollution. We take it somewhat for granted. Just like the violence that surrounds us. We are all aware of the pollution of the air in our cities but we don't talk about it everyday unless something happens to bring it to the fore. Like a smog alert that urges those most vulnerable to stay inside.

It is, however, also particular to culture and ethnicity which provide context for violence against and control of women. Although the individual's victimization may be particular, women's experiences of fear or memory of violence are universal. Your story is different than my story. But we all have a story.

Yet each of our voices is partial and incomplete. This fact compels us to understand the work on violence against women within our own faith tradition and in a much larger context of collaboration with other faith traditions. Our enterprise parallels that of women and men of many faiths who are also giving voice to victimization and challenging assumptions and practices that reinforce acts of violence against women. We are sisters and brothers in this work and as such, we have much to learn from each other.

Sadly an act of physical, emotional, or sexual violence against a woman creates a relationship between her and the perpetrator. It is not a relationship of choice which is fundamental to the violation. It is intimate because it touches the core of her being. Even

if it takes place within an established intimate partnership, or maybe especially if it takes place within an intimate partnership, the violence creates a dimension of relationship not chosen and creates a “victim.” An act of domestic terrorism or battering or of sexual abuse or violence is ethically a violation of oneself, of an existing relationship, and of community. Not only is harm done to another, but trust is betrayed and brokenness of self, relationship and community result. This is the sin of violence against women.

And here is the problem: for centuries, our religious traditions have been part of the problem of violence against women. To be sure, this is not the whole story. But it is a huge part of the story. Examples are abundant in every tradition and culture. It has been what I call religion in service to patriarchy. i.e. our faith traditions have been hijacked by those who would use the power of faith to justify the domination of women by men. This is the God whom Celie was complaining about; the God who isn't listening to women. But this isn't God's fault. It is the human creation of structures of dominance and control based on gender.

Patriarchy justifies violence against women; violence against women upholds the patriarchy.

And religion has been the glue that held all of this together for years on end.

But we are here gathered to say that no more will we allow our faith traditions to be this patriarchal glue.

No more will our sacred texts be used to condemn and shame victims of abuse or to justify the harm done to them.

No more will victims and survivors hear sermons that ignore and misunderstand their experiences.

No more will faith leaders take advantage of the vulnerability of victims or survivors and do further harm to them. Creating unsafe space in our worship spaces.

No more will the voices of women and children be silenced in our faith communities.

No more will our needs be absent from prayers.

No more will women and children be denied the resources of our faith traditions.

We are about the work of deconstructing this patriarchal misuse of our faith traditions to justify violence against women and children and also about reconstructing the power and messages of our faith traditions to name the sin, to lift up victims and survivors, to call perpetrators to account, to bring healing and justice, to restore the dignity of women and children.

This is the balm in Gilead lifted up in the spiritual. And ultimately that balm is justice.

Justice-Making

Justice: what is it??? What ever is needed for real healing. As learned from listening to victims/survivors.

1. truth-telling "you shall know the truth: that which is hidden shall be made known"
2. acknowledgement/ belief/ moral stand persistent widow
3. compassion: suffer with samaritan
4. protect the vulnerable God stands with the weakest hospitality
5. call perp to account "get a new life and a new heart" Ezekiel
6. restitution Zacheaus 4 x what he cheated

7. vindication persistent widow: restored to her community

Adult survivor of incest.

Alternative: Tlingit people of Southeast Alaska

We name and claim the balm in Gilead that we find in our own traditions.

- The first verse in a chapter entitled “The Women” establishes the equal nature of men and women and reminds each gender that God is a witness to their fulfillment of their mutual rights. The verse states:

“O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single soul, created of like nature its mate, and from them both scattered (like seeds) countless men and women— Fear God through Whom you demand your mutual rights. And (reverence) the wombs (that bore you) for God ever watches over you.”

The Qur’an provides guidance for male/female relations, describing believing men and women as “friends and protectors” of one another.

- The true meaning of Shalom Bayit: not silence about what does on in the home. But real peace with justice in the home.
- When Jesus preached that he came to bring abundance of life to the people, that means women too. It means safety and wellbeing. And justice when harm has been done.

I anticipate the day when my great grandchild comes to me with a story she heard at school about a family where there was violence or about a woman who was raped. That is when I sit her down and tell her about how it used to be in the old days. She is 15 years old and has never heard of any such thing. DV and sexual assault are peculiar, unusual events. And like the Tlingits, we respond as a community. Instead of reading about it in the paper every day as we do. Our great grandchildren will think it odd and unacceptable.

So our job is to

Teach, preach and pray. And that day will come.

The way things are is not the way they have to be.

Do not accept it because your mother did.

Perhaps she did what she had to do then.

Do not follow unquestioning in your father's footsteps.

He may have chose a path you do not want.

You must do what you can do now. You must choose for yourself.

Someday sexuality will be celebrated and shared as God's gift by all people.

Someday equality will be an erotic experience and violence will be abhorred.

Someday people will choose one another freely and rejoice in their choosing.

That day is within our reach.

We need not wait for another life, another incarnation, another generation.

In the dailiness of our lives, with those we love, we can do this differently.