

Tamar Times Two: An Examination of Prostitution and Rape and the Response of the Church

Introduction

Currently, sociologists accept that at least 30% of women will be the victim of sexual assault. The long-term effects of sexual assault and abuse differ by individual, social location and culture of origin. Rape cases rarely dominate news headlines unless the assailant and victim cross an additional cultural boarder of race, class, age or gender.¹ Within the context of the Hebrew Bible, similar patterns are equally as observable.

In Genesis 38, Tamar uses sexual intercourse to preserve her safety. In 2 Samuel 13, after being raped by her half-brother sequesters the second Tamar's brother Absalom sequesters her at his home. In both cases, the violation that would require punishment was not the act of sexual intercourse: it was the failure to respect covenantal responsibilities (Genesis 38) or property laws (2 Samuel 13). The lasting implications of the stories of the two Tamars are present today in the unwritten assumptions that underlay reactions to news stories and investigations of crimes.² As in ancient Israel, crimes against women receive little attention or concern within the wider society. In the 21st century crimes against women, receive little attention unless presented with a unique set of circumstances.

Recovery from sexual assault and abuse is a life long journey. Part of the journey of healing is struggling with the 'why' questions and working towards forgiveness of self. For many survivors, the Christian tradition(s) provide little comfort in working towards

¹ For example the current investigation of the Duke University lacrosse program, would the media coverage be as extensive if the accused were members of the Illinois State University swim team? I do not believe so. The case is appealing to media outlets because it is Duke University.

² Returning to the Duke University case, (rhetorically), how many individuals within the country reacted to the news of "well, what was she thinking going to a party like that as an exotic dancer?"

healing upon examination of the stories of some of the women in the Hebrew Bible and the lack of open discussion within the body of faith. While scholars note, that the violence, connotation and subsequent meaning is the result of examination through modern interpretation and may have little to do with God's actually intention towards women, for the woman who is working towards recovery, the Hebrew Bible provides several texts of terror.

Avoidance of the texts needs to be discouraged, they need discussion, debate and to provide lessons for the congregation on issues of marginalization and social justice. In discussing passages such as these, the members of the pastoral staff name themselves as individuals who are willing to discuss and support individuals through recovery from sexual abuse, domestic violence and rape. By naming abuse from the pulpit, ministers can facilitate discussions that can lead to healing, a greater understanding of the long term effects of violence and create a place for authentic conversations between community members.

Genesis 38: The Act of Prostitution as Survival

Genesis 38 opens with the reader learning that Judah, having left his brothers shortly after selling Joseph to the Egyptians, moved to the Adullamite region and married an unnamed Canaanite woman who bore him three sons, Er, Onan and Shela. Judah secures Tamar as the wife for Er. Unlike other narratives, given no familial information about Tamar, leading readers to question the foundation of the marriage: is this marriage to consolidate power? Alternatively, did he act to gain wealth or secure protection? We are not given information nor does the narrative continue past Genesis 38 in a manner

that suggests such information is important to the narrative. Viewed as wicked before the LORD, the LORD kills Er (Gen 38:7). As discussed by Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, Er reversed in Hebrew, means evil.³ Again, no additional information regarding the transgression(s) by Er that may have lead to his killing is given to the reader.

According to levirate marriage, as Tamar had not produced a son, Onan is required to impregnate Tamar so that Er may have a male heir. Onan, recognizing that a male child would be the heir or Er (thus reducing Onan's inheritance) refuses to ejaculate inside Tamar. Again, the LORD views Onan's actions as displeasing which results in Onan's death as well. Onan's actions provide areas that are more speculative: is his refusal fear of sexuality as van Dijk-Hemmes suggests.⁴ Alternatively, is his motivation based on greed, knowing that a male heir would receive 1/3 of Judah's estate?⁵ Or, is the action more sinister where Er and Onan are merely players and the LORD is punishing Judah for his actions in Genesis 37? Onan's motivations are not mentioned indicating that the meaning of the narrative is found within the relationship of Judah and Tamar.

After Onan's death, Judah instructs Tamar to return to her familial home. While sending her back to her familial home, Judah does not release her from further obligation: she is still the property of Judah. Judah promises to recall Tamar after Shela reaches maturity. After not being given to Shela, Tamar devises a plan by which to become

³ Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy: Between Rape and Seduction (2 Samuel 13 and Genesis 38)" in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, Mieke Bal, Ed. The Almond Press: Decatur, Georgia, 1989. Page 147.

⁴ IBID. Page 148.

⁵ While footnotes point the reader towards Deuteronomy 25:5-6, the time line of the D writers suggest either an alternative punishment (shaming of Onan's house) versus death. The D writers wrote after the J writers of Genesis 38, footnotes indicate the purpose of impregnation is to preserve inheritance laws as well as the necessity to keep property holdings within the family. Footnoting further indicates that such practice was common among several societies in Biblical, ANE and Roman societies. However, as the writers and time lines are different for Genesis 38 and Deuteronomy 25, the question remains is why is punishment of death delivered to Onan when Deuteronomy 25:5-10 deliver a punishment of public shaming on the house.

impregnated by Judah. Judah, believing that Tamar is a prostitute, engages in intercourse with her. Tamar secures collateral: Judah's seal, cords and staff.

Van Dijk-Hemmes suggests that Judah made an error when he viewed Tamar as a prostitute in Gen 38:14. In her translation, she states “and she sat down at the ‘opening of the eyes.’”⁶ Tamar’s position would indicate a sacred woman versus a prostitute.

According to van Dijk-Hemmes, “in the ancient Near East, women had the right to make love to a stranger or a priest. This was seen as a sacrifice to the Goddess of love, Astarte...In Israel this practice was strictly discouraged.”⁷ Having lived in Canaan for at least twenty years, Judah would have been familiar with the role of such a woman.

Although scholars question if Judah viewed the veiled Tamar as a holy woman, the conclusion to the narrative in Genesis 38, suggest the protection of the LORD towards Tamar in this narrative. When summoned by Judah to face execution for committing adultery, Tamar instead sends the signet, cord and staff. Upon recognizing the items as his own, Judah acknowledges that while both have sinned, his was greater and reversed his decision (Gen 38:26).

According to James Miller, Judah’s reversal demonstrates the difference in punishment between adultery and incest. Miller writes, “in this case, incest is exclusive of adultery, through levirate obligations may mitigate either accusation. Proving the former exonerates the guilty party of the latter crime, and thus adultery is avoided by proof of incest.”⁸ Through Judah’s actions, he accomplishes his goal, preservation of Er’s lineage and ‘saves’ his sole surviving son, Shela, from, in his perception, the of

⁶ IBID. Page 148.

⁷ IBID. Page 149.

⁸ James E. Miller “Sexual Offences in Genesis” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. Volume 90. 2000. Page 49.

danger of Tamar. In recognizing his sin, he allows Tamar to live and secures a line of progeny for his family.

Issues and Complexities in Genesis 38

The narrative of Genesis 38 proves to be a troubling text for women for several reasons. Most women who have studied the Hebrew Bible understand the role of “woman as property” role ascribed to women. This narrative underscores the proprietary transaction of marriage. Judah, for unknown reasons, decides to keep Tamar as a member of his household. However, in returning commanding her to return to her father’s home, he minimizes her value should she latter be returned without further obligation to Judah.

Tamar, realizing that her tenuous status has been placed in further jeopardy, devises a rather self-empowering plan: conceiving a male heir for Er’s lineage. However, in order to do so, she becomes a prostitute. While scholars point towards the selfishness of Judah in part as causation for Tamar to become a prostitute, the impetus for Judah’s actions stems from the actions of Er and Onan being seen as unacceptable before the LORD. Had either of Judah’s elder sons produced an heir with Tamar, Tamar would not act as a prostitute in order to secure her survival. In the examination of sources that attempt to examine Genesis 38 from a feminist perspective, the contextualization in relation to Genesis 37 is not examined as a means to understand the narrative. The superficial examination between the Genesis 37 and 38 is that two fathers grieve the loss of a son, and Judah is the victim of deceit by another (as he deceived). I believe the relationship is deeper: Judah’s two eldest (male) children are killed by the LORD. I

believe that the LORD is extracting revenge upon Judah for his actions in Genesis 37 and that Tamar is the means for such revenge.

Norma Rosen attempts to reclaim the story of Tamar in *Biblical Women Unbound* by presenting a Midrash on how Tamar seduced Shela becoming impregnated by him and then tricked Judah into intercourse. Rosen's Midrash proves to be more troublesome than the Jewish account within Genesis. By portraying Tamar in seductress role, Rosen continues to promote what she criticizes, the use of deceit by a woman to ensure her survival. Rosen states that she wishes to "emphasize the sheer breathtaking, custom-flouting effrontery of Tamar's behavior – deception, sexual seduction, harlotry and patriarchal insubordination."⁹ Rosen misses the underlying problem: although Tamar acted as her own advocate in the production of a heir, she still did so by using her body. The criticism of the text is not in determining which sin proved to be more damaging: it is that the only mechanism that ensured survival was through acting as a prostitute.

For individuals who are primary and secondary survivors of abuse, narratives such as Genesis 38 are troublesome. The entire narrative (and thus Tamar's need to resort to prostitution) is predicated on the LORD's killing of her husband and brother-in-law. Regardless of an understanding of women as property in the Ancient Near East, or the eventual positive outcome (Tamar is able to secure protection for herself), Tamar's behavior (prostitution) is because of an action by the LORD. Survivors often struggle with guilt and shame surrounding sexual abuse. The over-simplification commonly offered ("God was with you and wept with you") is problematic at best. For survivors, the pairing of this text with New Testament passages such as John 9:3, where Jesus heals

⁹ Norma Rosen. *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-tales*. The Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia. 1996. Page 115.

a blind man who was born blind so that God's work may be made manifest through him, the cycle of guilt and shame is exacerbated.

In working with texts such as Genesis 38 or John 9 from the pulpit, extreme care must be used to ensure the emotional safety of congregants. In preaching these texts, the message must become one of survival through the turmoil. In order for the message not to appear simplistic, the message must include the brokenness that both the writers of Genesis and John skip in these two narratives. With Tamar, time must be spent in developing her decision to engage in the act of prostitution and how that decision held emotional ramifications for her. The text is difficult to preach but the idea becomes one that a preacher must honor the consequences of being forced into a different level of subjugation prior to uplifting the success at the end.

2 Samuel 13: No Positive Outcome

The second Tamar found in the Hebrew Scripture is great-granddaughter of the first Tamar. Again, the woman named Tamar is used to further the narrative of the ruling elite. For this Tamar, there is no redemption. Raped by her half-brother, Amnon, she remains in her brother Absalom's home for what we assume to be the remainder of her life as she is no longer a virgin and of no value to her father's house. 2 Sam 13:21 indicates the schisms between birth order, and gender with David's refusal to punish Amnon, his first-born son.

2 Sam 13 provides the cunning advisor (Jonadab), the deceit of the ruler by his child (Amnon fakes an illness), breaking of custom (Tamar being left alone with Amnon), the breaking of law (the rape), the attempt by the victim to reclaim (proposed

marriage), banishment, plotting, finally murder (Absalom directs the murder of Amnon) and mourning (David for Amnon). The rape of Tamar is the catalyst for the events.

According to Alice Keefe, a named rape of a woman in the Hebrew Bible is a foreshadowing of a coming war between men.¹⁰ In quoting Danna Fewell and David Gunn, Mark Gray affirms Keefe's statement in quoting, "Politics are written on the bodies of women... War is written on women's bodies."¹¹

Keefe reiterates the meaning of rape in ancient Israel: the victim of the crime is not the woman for she is property. The victim of the crime is her father, or brother. Michael Parsons defines rape in ancient Israel as "forcible sex between a man and the 'female ward of non-consenting male guardians'."¹² While I appreciate Parson's continuation that rape, in the Hebrew Bible, "indicate that rape raises feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, humiliation, worthlessness and self-blame."¹³ I do not believe that is the intention of the scripture although that is the reality for survivors.

I agree with Keefe and how rape is used as a precursor for war and/or rape is a violation of property. The emotional aspect is not discussed nor considered causing many survivors struggle with texts such as these, as within the context of the law; the crime is not against the woman. The crime being committed is a theft of property. 2 Sam 13:1 sets up the justification and retribution by Absalom against Amnon. Upon the death of David, an unmarried Tamar would become the property of Absalom for she is

¹⁰ Alice Keefe. "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men" in *Semeia: an Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism*, Claudia Camp and Carole Fontaine, eds. Volume 61. Pages 79-81.

¹¹ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p 159. In "Amnon: A Chip Off the Old Block? Rhetorical Strategy in 2 Samuel 13.7-15 the Rape of Tamar and the Humiliation of the Poor" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Volume 77 (1998), p 41.

¹² Michael Parsons. "Luther and Calvin on Rape: Is the Crime Lost in the Agenda?" in *Evangelical Quarterly* Volume 74, Issue 2. 2002. Page 124.

¹³ IBID.

Absalom's brother, Amnon's half-brother. David, and to a lesser degree, Absalom would be viewed as the victims of Amnon's crime.

While many scholars focus on Tamar's return back to Absalom's home, in 2 Sam 13:11-17, Tamar attempts prior to and after her assault to prevent public humiliation. Gray highlights this when writing, "ancient Israel knew, better than many modern social analysis, that private morality is intimately linked to more general public policies and practices, especially vis-à-vis the disadvantaged."¹⁴ Tamar knew her assault would bring both same to herself and potentially the king: even under great duress, she attempted to rationalize with Amnon.

Jack Sasson questions Tamar's belief that David would allow for the marriage between Amnon and Tamar. According to Sasson, "in antiquity, such marriages were only found in a few royal houses (Egypt, Elam, some Anatolian tribes), and they would have shocked the mores of the people in Canaan and Israel."¹⁵ Sasson points towards Lev 18:9 and 18:11 as reasons for questioning Tamar's request. While I agree with the conclusion of Sasson and others that David would have prohibited the marriage between, I understand Tamar's request as an attempt to rationalize with her attacker. Additionally, I believe the rhetoric of 2 Sam 13:11-13 to be Tamar's attempt to bring in the law as a means to deter Amnon.

After the rape, Tamar begs Amnon not to throw her out of his home. In language that is very similar to Gen 38:26, Tamar states "No, my brother; for this is wrong in sending me away is greater than the other you did to me." While in Genesis, Judah used

¹⁴ Gray. Page 51.

¹⁵ Jack M. Sasson. "Absalom's Daughter: An Essay in Vestige Historiography." in *The Land that I will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of J. Maxwell Miller.*, J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham, eds. (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, UK). 2001. Page 189.

the logic of the greater sin to forgive Tamar, the second Tamar did not receive the same compassion. Tamar's statement again appeals to the law, this time in Deuteronomy 22:28-29 where Amnon is required to pay David and keep Tamar as his wife, never to divorce her. Instead, he calls to a servant and has Tamar removed, bolting the door behind her.

Through Amnon's rape and eviction of Tamar, the reader sees the emotional and psychological repercussions of rape. Tamar rips off the long robe she wore indicating she is no longer a virgin daughter of the king. She places ashes on her head as a sign of grief. She cries as she exits. At this point, Absalom asks if Amnon was the perpetrator. With her affirmative response, Absalom replies for her to be quiet, reminds her of the familial ties and tells her not to take this to heart.

Although Absalom provides a place of residence for Tamar, both Absalom and David fail Tamar at this juncture of the narrative. Neither David nor Absalom seek immediate justice for Tamar. David chose to ignore his anger and refused to punish his first-born son. Absalom stopped speaking to Amnon. Tamar remains silenced in her brother's home, no longer of value to her father or brother. Keefe offers the following analysis "family is the nucleus of all common life, and the violence within a family ruptures the heart of the social body."¹⁶ Absalom's actions coupled with David's lack of action provide us "a window opening to a view of the irreparable breach within the *shalom* of Israel enacted at its heart – in David's own family."¹⁷

The remainder of the narrative centers on Absalom's revenge. He invites first David (who declines) to a sheep shearing in Ephraim. David declines however after

¹⁶ Keefe. Page 92.

¹⁷ IBID. Page 92.

negotiation, he agrees to send all of his sons. Absalom prepares a great feast and during the celebration, he indicates to his servants that it is time to kill Amnon. Initially, David heard that Absalom killed all of his sons. David rips off his garments and begins grieving. Jonadab, who helped Absalom trick David, corrects the assumption. Amnon is the only son killed and out of revenge of the rape of Tamar. The remaining princes arrive and all weep bitterly, not for the vengeance but for the death of Amnon at the hands of Absalom.

2 Sam 23 – 36 raises questions regarding the sequences of events. Was Absalom also prepared to kill David? Or, did he believe that David would not attend and used an invitation to David as a negotiating tool to receive what he coveted: an opportunity to seek revenge on Absalom? In knowing of the feud between Absalom and Amnon, why did David consent to allowing all of his sons to be present at this event? As Keefe argued and as outlined above, the rape of Tamar created the foundation for the assassination of Amnon and the latter battle between Absalom and David. I do not believe that Amnon acted out of the need for vindication of his sister: the timeline is too long to suggest such an event. I question Absalom's motives beginning with 2 Sam 13:20 in accusing Amnon immediately. By taking Tamar into his home, did Absalom then secure for himself an agent by which he hoped to become king?

Pastoral Issues of 2 Samuel 13

The rape of Tamar cannot be rationalized. In this narrative, we see father unwilling to punish his son for rape, banishment, abandonment by the father, and a culture that views the rape not as a violation such as murder but as damage to property.

Even with the deepest of understandings of the role of women (to bare children) intact, the rape of Tamar (like other rape narratives found in Scripture) is disturbing for even in the NRSV, the emphasis is not on the consequence for the woman. Instead, the consequence (2 Sam 13:23-39) is on the ramifications for the men.

The punishment for rape depended on location (if the woman did not cry out, she was also put to death), and status (married, betrothed or single). The lack of recognition of the psychological issues surrounding a power dynamic that allows rape to remain unpunished with partial ownership on the victim proves to make this passage among the more troubling texts in Scripture for the modern and post-modern readers. While examinations of psychological ramifications are a luxury of class and culture, the issue remains; a foundational text reiterates the lack of punishment for rape. The narrative of Tamar indicates the amount of shame and the unintentional willingness to act as a co-conspirator by failing to report rape because of the endemic cycle of shame. Tamar remains silent after her rape.

The cycle of shame that many rape survivors discuss centers on overcoming holding the belief that blame of rape is on the victim. Survivors often discuss feeling ‘unworthy’ or ‘unclean’ years after sexual assault. Tamar’s physical description of the ashes and her tearing of the robe provide a visible description on the internalized feelings of many women. With Tamar, we see a young victim of rape who “did everything right” and still was victimized a three levels: first by the rapist, then her family and finally her wider society that viewed women as property and rape as crime of property.

The 2 Samuel text is not one that can be brought back to a “feel-good” resolution. The text is one that pastors and preachers must use to issue a challenge for justice. We

continue to silence Tamar today: according to the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC), only 1 in 100 rapists received jail time while 84% of all rapes go unreported. The primary reason for not reporting rape was embarrassment, shame and the desire to keep the assault private.¹⁸ Churches and other houses of worship need develop an authentic outreach to survivors. I believe this text should be a lectionary passage if only to force Christian preachers to wrestle with the text in an honest manner.

The currently agreed upon statistic is that one and three women will be the victim of sexual abuse of some form during her lifetime. For the church to ignore the real probability that sexual assault will impact a majority of church members, either through primary or secondary victimization, is a disservice to the church. Liberal churches need to become leaders in naming rape as a crime against the church from the pulpit. In doing so, not only does the church work at reclamation of a deeply disturbing text, the church also becomes a point for healing for survivors.

Suggestions for the Pastorate

The subjugation of women is well known within the context of the Hebrew Bible. Through the stories of the Tamars, we see two women struggle with how their lives are dependant on the role of the men. Without individual legal protection, both women find themselves the victims of a sexual act. In Genesis, Tamar is able to use prostitution. In 2 Samuel, Tamar's rape is one of greed by her half-brother.

In Genesis, Tamar uses prostitution as a means to secure her survival. While I agree that Judah's reluctance to allow Tamar to in the presence of his youngest son was an incorrect decision, I believe that ultimately, Tamar's predicament occurred because of

¹⁸ <http://www.barcc.org/thefacts.html>

the LORD's anger towards Judah and his sons. Tamar saves her life through obtaining items that would indicate to Judah who had committed the greater crime. Judah, recognizing the items, acknowledges his error and welcomes back Tamar.

In 2 Samuel, Tamar's great-granddaughter, also named Tamar, is the victim of an unpunished rape. Her brother silences her. His reminds her of the familial ties to silence her. He does not wish for her to bring additional shame to the house. Tamar is the victim of her father whose love for his eldest son, Amnon, is greater than that of his daughter. David willingly contributes to the cover-up. With Tamar, we see a rape from the inception to the devastation of the victim.

Churches need to be come more adept at being advocates for the systems that continue to promote violence and subjugation against women (and children). Passages such as the ones found in Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 13 need to be preached from the pulpit: not as ones of resolution but as ones of challenge to the congregation as ways to minister to victims of violence. Local pastoral associations need to work with domestic violence advocates and rape crisis centers to develop outreach, which will aid survivors during the journey of healing.

Healing from rape and sexual abuse is an on-going, long-term process. Historically, the church has mirrored society in assisting individuals with recovery from sexual trauma. Pastors are often ill equipped and untrained on how to work with a parishioner after a presents us with a story of a recent traumatic event. Well-intended authors write statements that at best can be considered offensive, at worse, dismissive to the healing process that a victim must undergo in order to transform to a survivor. For example, Marie Fortune writes in *Sexual Violence* that:

A young woman was raped at the age of eighteen. A religious person, she reflected upon her rape experience in light of her faith. And, as she recovered, she observed that her prayer life had shifted dramatically since the assault. Prior to the rape, she recalled that her prayers most often took the form of “Dear God, please take care of me.” As she recovered from the rape, she realized that now her prayers began, “Dear God, please help me remember what I have learned.”¹⁹

Fortune continues to discuss the woman’s previous relationship with God as immature but the shift in the prayer language indicates a more “mature, assertive relationship with God.”²⁰ I find the causation drawn by Fortune to be dangerous at best. An individual who is struggling with either faith or the “how” question regarding sexual violence may find statements like Fortunes reminiscent of the punitive God more closely associated with the Hebrew Bible. I understand that Fortune is drawing upon one individual’s experience: her example makes me nervous that a traumatic event appears to be internalized as what allowed the survivor to develop a mature faith practice.²¹

Often, we discuss the idea of naming sexual shame from the pulpit, but most pastors shy away from doing so. I believe that in order to do so, the local pastor must be prepared to provide follow-up pastoral care for congregants. Naming items from the pulpit in subtle manner indicates the pastor is a safe individual to engage in a conversation surrounding sensitive issues. For example, in preaching the familiar text of the woman at the well (John 4:1-42), I illustrated the element of shame present with the woman walking out to the well in the middle of the day. I provided a listing of modern

¹⁹ Fortune, Marie. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2005, page 144.

²⁰ Fortune, Marie. Page 144.

²¹ I will freely admit to this being a personal bias. I wonder based on my own trauma history about individuals who point to traumatic events as bringing them closer to God. I would be reticent to use this as an example because I feel that it might be as easily turned into a punitive interpretation of a violent event. While survival from a traumatic event provides a lesson and the change in prayer can be used as a point of empowerment, I really struggle with the word ‘mature’ used in this context.

examples that might cause an individual shame (divorce, AIDS, being abused) but how shame is an internal reaction to the expectation of society NOT an emotion ascribed as necessary or beneficial by God. By reducing shame, the pastorate can help to promote an individual's self-esteem, the healing process and affirm an individual's worth as a child of God.

While my sermon illustration provided a specific opportunity for a healing event, even if the opportunity is not provided during the context of the liturgy, the formation of a safe space may allow congregants to begin their healing process. As worship is often the only time, an individual engages within the church community, the creation of a safe space through prayers, sermons and ritual may establish the local congregation as a safe space for an individual. Ministers must remember that congregants often hear what we do not say: that an innocent statement may prove to be the catalyst for an individual to seek help.

Conclusion

Although the experience of sexual abuse can never be normalized, the sheer numbers of survivors demonstrate that many within our congregations will have experienced some form of sexual abuse prior to the age of eighteen. Our congregants experienced the trauma, as clergy we must reach out to be a voice for healing. Additionally, by subtly naming areas of potential shame, the pastor indicates that s/he is a person that is willing to discuss areas of sexuality and trauma. As a congregation is able to undertake such a task in a healthy, respectful manner, the church will create a community that is truly welcoming to all members.

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