

WGUMC October 21, 2018 John 4:1-19; 25b-30  
“What Would Jesus Say About the #Me Too Movement?”

The week before last, I was at a conference in San Antonio on clergy sexual misconduct, sponsored by COSROW (The Committee on the Status and Role of Women in the UMC). I went there with a dozen other clergy and laity from the Cal-Nevada Annual Conference to be trained to be on a response team that can be called upon to go into congregations that are in a crisis, whether it involves the pastor, a member of the staff or the congregation. Now, I have to say right up front that I am not a victim/survivor of sexual harassment or abuse. But if I am not a member of the #Me Too movement, why was I sitting there crying?

There has been so much going on lately, so many accusations and denials in the news. Typically, the media has been focusing on the politics, the divisions we have, and what gets lost is the pain we've experienced.

So I was crying for every victim, every survivor, every family, every institution, every community that is torn apart when trust is

betrayed. When you think about it, that's a lot of pain. Just in the U.S. one in four girls and one in six boys have been sexually abused by the time they are 18. [source: CDC] One in six women will be victims of rape or attempted rape. [source: RAINN]

It's even worse in the military. One in four women and one in three men have been sexually assaulted by someone in their chain of command. About 60% of those who report the assault face retaliation and a third will be discharged within 7 months of reporting. [source: Protect Our Defenders]

My tears were prayers. God, how did we get here? And where do we go from here? If the Bible had been written by women, we might have some explicit guidance in these matters, but it wasn't. In fact, women are little more than a footnote in the story of our faith. So we really have to do some digging. We can read the words, but we have to listen closely for the Holy Spirit. And perhaps she will whisper to us what Jesus would have to say.

But in order to listen well, we need to understand a bit about gender relations in the ancient world, so let's look at Genesis 3. You know the story of Adam and Eve. When Adam gets caught eating the apple, he tries to blame Eve. God knows better and punishes them both. Adam will have to labor hard to make a living. Eve will have pain in labor. But that's not all. Eve's punishment includes this: "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

[Gen 3:16]

If you've ever wondered why men rule the world, the Bible gives us a reason. But let's remember that these first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis are much more mythological than historical. They are like Native American folk tales. They were told to explain why things are the way they are rather than to say this is how things should be. In fact, it would be hard to argue that men ruling over women was God's will in the beginning. Patriarchy comes in when sin comes in. And sin pretty much sets the stage for everything that follows.

In the Bible, a woman is a piece of property. Twice in Genesis, Abraham lets his wife, Sara, be taken into a king's harem just to secure safe passage through the kingdom. [Gen 12; 20] Shows you how vulnerable even married women were back then.

You know the David and Bathsheba story. [2 Sam 11] It's easy for us to think of this as an extra-marital affair, but that sounds consensual. It is far more accurate to think of this as a sexual assault because Bathsheba was in no position to refuse David. He was the king. He had all the power. And that is the very definition of sexual violence. What the experts will tell us about sex crimes is that they are not primarily about sex. They are all about power and the abuse of power.

Sadly, abusers are seldom called to account. When David's son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar, David does nothing. [2 Sam 13]. And many centuries later, not much has changed. Today, for every 1,000 rapes, 994 perpetrators walk free. [RAINN]

In the face of such disturbing statistics and such troubling stories, some of us desperately want to know what Jesus would have to say to the #Me Too Movement of today. So we turn to the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria when they meet at Jacob's well. You know the story well. The woman had five husbands and the man she was then living with was not her husband. And because of that, we have probably assumed that she was a loose woman. But in light of #Me Too it dawned on me that this may not be so.

Unless all five husbands died, we can safely assume that our Samaritan woman was divorced, probably more than once. But this wasn't her doing, because only men could initiate a divorce. They didn't even need a good reason. All they had to do was to write out a certificate and the marriage was dissolved. They didn't go to court. There was no marital support. Wives were simply dismissed.

One way or another, five husbands left this woman, and each time she was worth a little bit less, until she was worthless.

“Damaged goods.” And rung by rung, she fell down the ladder of self-worth until the only men who would have her were not the marrying kind.

This week, I tried to read this story from the perspective of this woman, and it occurred to me that she could well have been an abuse victim. Surely she was a victim of a system that put very little value on women. So when she met this strange man at the well, she had good cause not to trust him. But Jesus talked to her anyway, and pretty soon she discovered that he knew her whole life story. He knew about the five husbands. He knew about the man who wasn't her husband. And what's more, he saw the pain that she carried to the well with her every day in that empty jar.

The Bible tells us what Jesus said. Just as important is what he didn't say. He didn't blame her. He didn't say, as he said to the woman caught in adultery, “Go and sin no more.” [John 8:11] He could see that it wasn't her fault. She had been robbed of something very precious: her dignity, her humanity. Jesus knew that

because of all that she'd been through, she was dead inside. So he offered her a drink from the spring of water that gushes up to eternal life.

Jesus tells the woman of Samaria, "...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." In Jesus, Eve's old curse is now turned on its head. Instead of "your desire shall be for your husband and he will rule over you," it's as if he had said to her, "Your desire will be for me. And I won't rule over you, not as a tyrant rules over his subjects. No! I will reign in you. My power will become your power. My voice will become your voice. My truth will become your truth."

And so it was. The woman left her jar at the well and went into the town with power she didn't know she had, with a voice she had never used, proclaiming a truth and a life that she had never before dared to live. And "many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...." [4:39]

That woman gives me hope. In Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well found her voice and told her truth. And today, women and men are doing the same. Women and some men are telling their stories of abuse, as hard as they are to hear. And there are even some men who are confessing things they did to women years and years ago, and talking about the tremendous guilt that has been eating them ever since. This is a good start.

So what would Jesus say to them and to us? I don't believe that words are necessary, because the cross says it all. I look at that cross, and it says, "Me, too. I am with you, because they stripped me, too. They mocked and humiliated me, too. I am a victim, too." But the cross also says, "I love you. I forgive you." And it says very clearly, "Sin will not win." It says, "Look at me. I'm a survivor. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.' [John 11:25-26] So, all you who are broken and carrying

heavy burdens, come to the cross, come to me, for the pain stops here. The healing starts now.”

One of the speakers at the conference in San Antonio was a psychology professor, Dr. Jennifer Freyd, from the U of O. Dr. Freyd is a leading expert in trauma and institutional betrayal. After bombarding us with horrible statistics, she ended with a story of hope. She told us about Brenda Tracy, who was raped in 1998 by four men, two of them football players for Oregon State University. There was plenty of physical evidence for a conviction, but when the accusations became public, Brenda got scared and dropped the charges. The football players got a one-game suspension. The coach told the media that these were good boys who just made a bad choice.

Fast forward sixteen years. An investigative reporter dug up the story and again it was all over the papers. But this time, the new president of OSU wrote Brenda a two-page letter of apology on behalf of the university. He noted that while there is a statute of

limitations on sex crimes, “there is no statute of limitations on compassion or basic human decency.” Then the president hired her to advise the university on its sexual assault policies.

Meanwhile, the football coach, now with the Nebraska Cornhuskers, asked if she would be willing to meet with him, and they talked for hours. Then he invited her to speak to the team. He stood right there while she told these young football players the whole story, not just what happened at the party, but also how their coach had not taken what happened to her seriously. She told how she had hated him even more than her assailants and how she struggled to live with the trauma of the assault and the betrayal of the university. Somehow she still managed, as a single mom, to finish school and become a nurse. After her talk, she posted a photo of herself with the coach, and captioned it: “This is what accountability looks like.” [reported in multiple news outlets, including the *Oregonian* in June, 2015]

When Dr. Freyd read us the letter of apology in San Antonio, I started to cry again. Just goes to show you how powerful an apology can be. Real apologies, not fake ones, are truly a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

The cross of Jesus Christ says to the #Me Too Movement and to all of us that women and men can heal from the sin and the trauma of sexual violence. No one needs to die of thirst, even if their water jar has been smashed to pieces. All we have to do is come to the well.

### *Fill This Jar*

*The well is deep, the sun is high,  
the air is hot, the breeze has died.  
This burden's mine, I have to bear,  
but no one sees, and no one cares.  
I am so tired of coming here  
to fill this jar with all my tears.*

*My strength is gone, my hopes are spent.  
I do not know where my dreams went.  
You, by the well, just who are you?  
And can you tell me what to do?  
Why do you look at me that way?  
What is it that you have to say?*

*You want a drink, but you can tell  
I die of thirst beside this well.  
You offer me the life I need.  
By living water, I am freed!  
I can't believe! How can this be,  
that you would give such love to me?*

*My friends, this well is yours and mine,  
and we can come here anytime.  
Don't wait, come now, come as you are.  
Let joy, not tears, fill up your jar.  
The life of Christ, it overflows.  
Take it from me as one who knows.*

[I wrote this hymn poem in 2013 when I couldn't find any hymns in our hymnal that went with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.]