

Walk with Her
Judges 19:1-10 (NRSV)

Walking through a door is one of the most common things we do in a day. We walk through the doors of our homes, jobs, schools, and churches. We don't pay much attention to doors. But the simple action of walking out a door is one of the most dangerous and difficult things a person escaping from an abusive relationship can do. Leaving such a relationship provokes the rage, anger, and violence of an abusive partner, making him or her more dangerous. Leaving can lead to physical injury, emotional trauma, and even death if the abuser finds the victim. And yet, the unnamed woman in our text today did just that. She walked out the door and left.

We don't have the exact details of her situation and what led her to leave. But we have clues about what kind of environment she was living in. Our text tells us she lived in a time when no king ruled Israel. Every person made his or her own decisions, leading to general chaos and disorganization in society. God's presence was at a minimum and people could easily get into trouble.

In the midst of this chaos, lived the Levite and the unnamed woman. The text identifies her as his "concubine." That meant this woman was not the Levite's wife and she did not have to be treated as such. Instead she was at the disposal of her master, used for his pleasure and under his control. Out in the middle of nowhere hill country they lived together. Her serving him and providing for his desires.

But one day something happened. Something happened that caused the unnamed woman to walk out the door. We don't know what that something was. But we can imagine drawing from the news stories and headlines we see every day about women across the globe suffering

violence and abuse. Maybe he hit her one too many times, or called her a name she would be too ashamed to utter again in public. Maybe he denied her access to her friends, isolating her from the outside world. Maybe his continual refusal to acknowledge her as a person, as someone with feelings and needs, or him withholding love became too much to bear. No matter the situation, something escalated to the point that the woman saw escaping from her master as her only choice.

One day, a now or never moment came, and she took the opportunity. Resolute in her decision she slipped out the door and down the road. She looked left and right, a mixture of adrenaline, fear, and freedom coursing through her veins. Where to go? Her friend on the next hill? No too close, he would look for her there. Maybe over to the next town? But where would she stay? She had left with no possessions, no money, no cell phone to call a friend and she had no idea where shelter might be or how to ask for it. So she headed to the place that was her safe place, the place she had grown up in, been loved and nurtured in.

You may have a place like this, or know a place like it. The place you run to when things get too chaotic or the world seems too much to bear. It may be a best friend's apartment, a cabin, a great aunt's, a church, or a tree fort in the woods. For the unnamed woman it was her parent's house.

She headed straight for that house. She didn't even notice her sore dust covered feet or the sweat pouring down her back as she ran to her father's house. It was only as she reached the door that she noticed she had been holding her breath. She let out a sigh, a sigh mixed with relief and joy, sorrow and shame. Slowly, timidly she brought her hand up to the door and knocked. As she waited for the door to open questions began running through her mind: would they have

her? would they understand? would they be disappointed? But all these questions melted away with the warm smile of her father and the familiar smell of home wafting out to greet her.

Over the next four months the woman had time to sort through things. To explain what happened to her family and to herself. We do not know what her family's reaction was but we know that they let her stay. For four months they welcomed her back home and did not force her to return to her master.

Then one day out of the blue, he appeared. The man she had gone away from; the man she tried to erase out of the fiber of her being was standing in front of her. The courage she had had to leave was gone as she watched her father run out with joy to meet him. The pains of betrayal coursed through her veins as she watched her father, her protector, warmly embrace the man she had escaped from.

Some of us might think the father was cruel or at least misguided. We want the father to come storming out with a shotgun in hand telling the Levite to turn around and go back to where he came from. But in the truth, this very situation where a victim's family sides with the abuser happens every day. After all, there are a multitude of reasons for wanting couples to get back together. "Think about what's best for the kids." "Remember you promised 'til death do you part." "Don't disgrace the family." "What happened wasn't that bad." "He's really sorry, just forgive him." "You have to learn how to work through the hard times; you can't just run from them." And the list goes on.

Whatever reasoning was running through the father's mind, he welcomed the Levite like a son-in-law, feeding him, entertaining him, flattering him. This was more like rejoicing in the prodigal son coming home than facing the person who wounded your daughter so badly that she needed to flee. For five days the woman's father pampered the Levite. Instead of the Levite

having to speak sweetly to the woman to try to win her back, her father lavishly wooed the Levite. The woman's feelings and needs were brushed aside and her return to the life with Levite was imminent.

And so late in the day on the fifth day, the woman, the concubine stepped out the door of her father's house. Her initial courage to leave the Levite cannot go unnoticed or without great praise. But in the end her own father, her safe space betrayed her back into the hands of her master. And she went back to him as silently as she had left.

The door of her father's house was one of the last doors she would walk through. As the rest of the story explains the next door she entered would be the door at which she would suffer the greatest violence and abuse of her life. Violence that would lead to her death.

Today as we see the woman walk out the door of her safe place, *her home* towards her death, we cannot let her walk in vain. Instead, by giving voice to her story and so many stories like hers, we can refuse to let her memory die. We are called to open our eyes and hearts to the unnamed woman's story. A story crying to us today, "Do not let our sisters and brothers walk alone in dangerous times. Help them find sanctuary and solace." A story that calls us to be a continual reminder of God's presence that walks with all of us on our journey of life. A story that calls us to stand up against violence and abuse, working towards the healthy, loving relationships that God calls us to create.

The unnamed woman carries with her the names of so many victims who suffer the consequences of unhealthy, abusive relationships. The stories of those who have left, those who have stayed, and those who have both left and returned. Don't let her story and the many other stories she carries walk out the door alone and be forgotten. Get up and walk with her.

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