

SUSANNA: DEALING WITH SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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In his movie "Play It Again, Sam," Woody Allen, trying to imitate Humphrey Bogart in learning how to have mastery over women, says, "I never knew a woman who didn't understand a slap in the face or a slug from a .45." I laughed at that line, in part, probably, because I knew he could never do it. But it isn't really funny at all. It is, in fact, all too real an expression of how men think they can treat women.

Violence against women is on a rampage in the United States. Rape is the fastest growing crime, with a rape or attempted rape occurring every 3½ minutes. One in three women will be sexually assaulted at least once in her lifetime, according to the FBI. In 1989, 1,387 rapes were reported to the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center, and the number has increased almost every year. However, the true extent of sexual assault is not reflected in that figure, because, in the estimate of the FBI, only about 10% of rapes are ever reported to the police. Approximately 76% of the sexual assaults reported to the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center each year involve children under the age of 18, but in cases reported nationwide the age ranges from 2 weeks to 93 years.

Sexual violence is not isolated in the minds and actions of a few sick men; sexual violence has become a societal pathology. Not one woman is unaffected by the atmosphere of sexual violence that pervades our culture. In one of the most disturbing piece of information I came across, a study reported by Women's

Legal Defense showed that 16% of citizens and 18% of patrol police officers interviewed believe that "it would do some women good to get raped."

Too often and for too long the church has been silent in the face of such violence—or worse, it has been among the forces that have blamed women for their victimization. Our silence has been an act of complicity, and our theological and scriptural tradition has been an accomplice to sexual violence. We know that Hagar was "handed over" to Abraham; that Bathsheba was taken by David; that Tamar was raped by her brother Amnon; that Lot offered his two virgin daughters to men bent on violence to save his two male visitors in his home from being raped. It is time to break the silence.

The story of Susanna is a story of one woman's great courage in the face of sexual assault. It is the story of an attempted rape that was thwarted by Susanna's courage and the intervention of Daniel. Chapter 13 of Daniel is one of the additions to the Book of Daniel. It is not included in the Protestant Bible, but you will find it in the Roman Catholic Bible. Written in the First Century BC, it is considered the first short story in Hebrew literature, and it shows that stories about sleazy lawyers have been popular for a long time. It is a story with very close parallels to our contemporary situation.

Susanna represents all women who are the victims of sexual violence. Like most victims, her assailants are two men of prominent standing in the community, whose word against her is accepted without question--which is in itself another form of violence against women. And, as in most sexual assaults, her assailants are known to her. Most people are assaulted in supposedly safe places like their homes, workplaces, and schools, usually by people they know or even trust. Sex offenders are usually from the same race and background as their victims. Only 3% of sexual assaults are committed by black men against white women, and only 4% of sexual assaults are committed by white men against black women.

The two elderly judges are not nice men who just got carried away with their fantasies of a beautiful woman taking a bath. Of them God said, "Wickedness has come to Babylon through the elders and judges posing as guides to the people." They are men who failed to take responsibility for their behavior and have acted violently toward Susanna. Their violence was in exerting power over a woman. Rape is an act of violence, not sexual gratification. Approximately two-thirds of sex offenders have available sex partners or are married. In addition to their attempted rape of Susanna, these two judges are evidently repeat offenders. Daniel in his accusation says, "This is how you have been behaving with the daughters of Israel and they were too frightened to resist; but here is a daughter of Judah who could not stomach your wickedness." About 10% of convicted offenders say they raped at least 25 times before they were caught.

The role of the crowd is not surprising. The crowd just goes along with the accusation of the two men. Even though the text says they never thought Susanna would have done such a thing as the judges accused her of doing, they never even considered the possibility that she was the victim. The burden of proof is on the victim to prove she's been victimized. One of the most ignorant attitudes of society is the one that says of rape victims: "They were asking for it. Just look how they dress!"

And what about the husband? He takes no role in the story. Sometimes a further trauma to rape victims is the feeling of being rejected by their partners as being "damaged goods." Rape victims need to know that they were not at fault in what happened. They need support, understanding, and enablement to regain a sense of control over their lives.

In the role of the hero, next to Susanna, who is the real hero of the story, is Daniel who is the model of the role men need to play and of the role society needs to play in coming to the aid of sexual assault victims. The victimization of women is intolerable. Too often the role of Daniel has had to be taken by women. Thank God for the Rape Crisis Center, the Women's Center, and Sojourner House as well as others

agencies that defend women. We as a church can be proud that we have provided space for the Rape Crisis Center to hold meetings. In this state, the role of Daniel is performed outstandingly well by Brother to Brother, an organization committed to ending men's violence against women. I am honored to be a member of the board of Brother to Brother. We can be especially proud of having made it possible for Brother to Brother to carry out its work by providing space in this building for their meetings.

I'm nearly done. I thank you for listening to this difficult message. It is time for the church to speak, and it is time for the church to listen to the stories of women—to their fear and their pain. I decided to preach on this unhappy subject for three reasons. My first reason is that maybe there are some victims here who need to know that what happened is not their fault, and that God is outraged at what happened and wants you to be healed; that you have the love and support of the church; and that there are places you can go for help.

My second reason is that any who are perpetrators of sexual violence—and all men contribute to violence against women by the use of various forms of coercion in his relationships with women—need to know of their responsibility to honor women and take control of their behavior. Brother to Brother is available.

My third reason is that we are to be Daniel. We are to work for the elimination of violence. We must speak boldly against the violence that reduces life to a matter of survival. When we speak about Shalom, we are speaking of the vision of a society without violence or fear. In Leviticus we read God's promise: "I will give you peace in the land . . . and none shall make you afraid (26:6)."

I discovered Margaret Fuller's words of blessing in my reading this week. Her words of blessing are: "May God keep you safe until the word of your life is fully spoken." Living with the threat of violence destroys the shalom that God wishes for us. We must break the silence on sexual violence that still haunts

churches even as it is front page news. Our silence will not protect us. Let us speak the word of our lives for the sake of the survival of some and justice for all.