

Judges 19:22-30, NRSV

Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'" (Judges 19:30)

Many of us accept that suffering is an expected part of life but remain silent about *our* sufferings. We don't talk about the midnight hours of tears and wrestling. We fail to mention the questions and doubts that we have about God. We don't call our doctors, and we push through the pains all the while plagued by fatigue—because we feel that calling attention to the things that hurt us means that our faith is not strong enough.



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We think that any measure of illness, doubt, or weakness is somehow proof positive that we have failed.

This is particularly true of black women. Think about it: we are supposed to keep the family together. We are supposed to keep the job together. We are supposed to keep the church together. And when we can't do it all, we feel scared, ashamed, and lonely. Our feelings of doubt, sickness, and weakness, we believe, are indicators that we have failed as a woman. So we hide these parts of our lives from the rest of the world and keep silent about the things that reveal our imperfections.

Deep down, all of us, men and women, have stories of pain and suffering that we have kept to ourselves. However, black people are increasingly deciding not to hide anymore; we are talking; we are breaking the silence. I want to spend a little time this morning telling a woman's story, discussing women's health, and breaking the silence.

Meet the young woman in our text. She is the concubine, the mistress, of a man from

Ephraim. For some reason, she leaves this man and returns to her father's home in Bethlehem. I want to pause here because already we see a woman who takes a step for herself. We don't know why she left this man. Maybe he was abusing her or simply didn't respect her. Maybe down deep she knew he was the kind of man who would turn her over to a crowd of rapists. We don't know, but we do know that she left this man and took a big risk in doing so. Life for a single woman in ancient Israel was no bed of roses. She's a concubine. That means no one wanted to marry her. She was either too old, too ugly, or couldn't have children; as a result, she never attained the expected status for women during her time. And in the midst of this, she has settled for being a mistress. She had to be content with having someone else's man and enjoying only what was leftover—leftover affection, leftover attention, and leftover resources. But she finally decided that no matter what people were going to say about her, she needed to exit that situation. So she took what was left of her pride and her dignity and went home.

None too pleased about this, the man went to Bethlehem to woo her back to him and was somehow successful. After staying with her family for a couple of days, the man, his traveling servant, and the woman leave Bethlehem for the long trip back to Ephraim. They near Jebus and think that perhaps they can camp there for the night. But the man tells his manservant that he thought it better that they travel farther and stay among their own people and not among foreigners. Surely, they would be safe among their own people.

So they journey farther until they reach Gibeah, which belonged to the Benjamites. As the sun begins to set, another man from Ephraim who is living in Gibeah welcomes the company into his house.

In the middle of the night there is a pounding on the door. The men of the city, perversely, demand that the host turn the man over to them so that they may physically and sexually abuse him. Rather than surrender his guest to the crowd, the man says, "No, don't do this terrible thing to him. He is a guest in my house, but here—you can take my virgin daughter and his concubine." Don't take the man, but take these two women. Don't touch the man, but do what you want to the young women. Ravish the women if you want. But let the man keep his dignity. Here, have the two women.

This is an ugly story ... a gruesome story ... a familiar story. This is a similar scenario to what we remember happening to Lot in Sodom, where in Genesis 19, Lot, in order to protect his divine guests, offers his daughters to the crowd. But this story, though similar, is somehow different because this happens among home folk.

And unfortunately isn't that often times how it really is? It's the place where we ought to be safe but we are not. Indeed most violence happens among those who are considered home folk. More than 85 percent of the men, women, and children who are sexually assaulted knew, loved, or trusted the perpetrator! Domestic violence is the single greatest cause of injury to women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. We are wrong to assume that the people and things that hurt and damage us are always somewhere "out there." They are all around us, in our own neighborhoods, workplaces, and homes.

The story continues. The man pushed the concubine out the door, slammed it shut, and thought, "That should satisfy them; we are safe now." And all night, the men raped, abused, and beat her, and in the morning, they left her for dead at the door of the house.

This is an ugly story...a gruesome story...a familiar story.

Laying her lifeless corpse across the back of his donkey, the man finished the journey back to Ephraim. When he got there, he took a knife and cut her body into twelve pieces, and sent one piece to each tribe of Israel, saying: "Consider this, take counsel, and speak out."

CONSIDER THIS: COMMUNITY IMPACT

This is a horrible story. It is a story of pain, suffering, misogyny, and betrayal; a terrifying tale of a woman seen only as serving the purpose of providing the twisted pleasure of perverted men. She is a woman who has no name, no voice, and little agency, a woman left for dead. And the man shoves the ugliness into everyone's faces. He is sending a message. A clarion call that yells, "What happened to this woman is unacceptable and even inexcusable!" He is saying that what happened to her is everyone's problem. This is not just his problem or just the problem of her family and his family. This is not just an issue to be settled between him and the abusers. Rather this is a community problem. And he holds them accountable.

How can such a visual message be ignored? Is it possible to say, "But this isn't our problem" with a bloody arm in your hands? Can you sit and do nothing with a bodiless head in the messenger's bag, or simply blame others with a truncated leg in your lap? There is no way to cover up the ugliness, the brutality of what has happened to this woman.

Now it's a common homiletical device to say that the unnamed people in the Bible represent anyone and everyone—that this woman is every woman. So I began to pull out all the statistics on black women and violence. About how the majority of women on welfare are [in that position as] a result of leaving abusive partners and how black

women are the fastest growing population of prison inmates. I wanted to discuss the fact that the church is the most financially supported system of apartheid—with 85 percent of its members, the women, being led by the 15 percent minority, the men. Finally, I wanted to tell you that one in four women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. However, I quickly realized something that shifted my concern. You see, the fact that these numbers are so high is not my chief concern. The concern is not in the numbers. My soul is disquieted when just *one* woman cries herself to sleep every night or when *one* woman has been intimidated and beaten by her partner. It takes only one woman for this to be an ugly, gruesome, shameful story.

And this text says, Look at her! Hold the bloody limb in your hands! Look! Realize that this could have been you, your daughter, your wife, your sister! Look! This is no isolated incident. Look at this unnamed woman...look at all women!

TAKE COUNSEL

With this drastic action, the Ephraimite called together representatives from each tribe of Israel to say: "What are we going to do about this?" We must take counsel.

Don't you like the way crisis situations bring people together? People who would never sit down at a table with one another, people who would not ordinarily talk to one another, from different neighborhoods, states, or even countries, will come together in a crisis. I mean we bring in experts, consult our holy books, and even form committees that vow to do something.

Violence against women is such a crisis situation. After far too many years of suffering in silence, the time has come to gather together and do something. We need to bring in the experts. We need to come from our different

perspectives, holding the bloody pieces of the tragedy in our arms, and take counsel. All of us are holding bloody pieces, you see; every truncated body part of this nameless woman represents a woman you know. It's time to speak out!

SPEAK OUT

Now I know that this is not a feel-good sermon, but the silence about violence against women is not a feel-good issue. But the real issue is as brutal as the rawness of this story; the man cut up the woman, his concubine, and sent pieces of her body throughout Israel and demanded to them and us: "Consider it! Take counsel! Speak out!" We need to speak out! Speak out on the ugly issues, the things that no one wants to talk about, and even on the issues society would rather keep quiet. Speak out, he says. Speak out!

This is not optional. It is our duty *not* to be silent! We must not ignore or keep secrets. We must speak out! And there are three ways we can speak out about women's health.

1. We must speak out before something is wrong. We have to talk to our younger women about sex and relationships and develop healthy boundaries with young people. We have to talk about our faith, beliefs, and triumphs as well as our challenges, doubts, and failures. We need to watch out for one another genuinely and inquire regularly about the well being of one another. We need to instill self-love within ourselves and monitor the things that chip away at women's self-esteem. What would happen if we showed concern for one another?

2. We need to be willing to speak out about our own stories of abuse. We need to talk to one another about how it feels to lie about the bruises, experience sleepless nights, and live in fear. These are our stories, and if we don't tell them, we will continue to remain isolated;

we will suffer in silence. We then become nameless and voiceless.

3. We need to speak out for those who can't speak out for themselves. The woman in this text has no name and no voice. And at the end of the story, the man does the right thing. He begins to speak out for her. She can't tell her story, but he tells her story on her behalf. We have to tell the stories for those who can't tell their own stories. We have to tell the story of our foremothers who struggled and somehow made a way, as well as the story of those who were killed by the struggle. We need to get out of this mentality that what does not kill you makes you stronger. The truth is that sometimes it does kill us, and other times, when it doesn't kill us, it leaves us weaker, as shadows of the selves we once were. We need to tell those stories too. We need to be advocates for women. That means becoming educated about and proactive on the issues of violence against women.

I know I am asking a hard thing—this speaking out. This commitment demands that we create a space where it is OK to question and to doubt, to cry and be scared, to be tired and feel weak. It means we have to find a place where you can walk up and lose your mind and still walk out with your dignity. That's not easy to do. It requires a real adjustment of values—a reprieve from judgment and exclusivity about who is in and who is out. Women need to assured that they are not going to be gossiped about and that no one will take advantage of them because of their vulnerability. If we don't create this space and if we don't speak out, we will die. We will die slow, painful, isolated, spiritual, emotional, and physical deaths. Speaking out is not a luxury; it's a necessity.

And we come from a long line of women who have spoken out, women who had something to say about their spiritualities,

their feelings, and their bodies when no one else wanted to hear about it. Women like Rev. Jarena Lee, the intellectual Anna Julia Cooper, and eighteenth-century abolitionist Maria Stewart. Women like Evelyn White and Meri Danquah, authors of the first books dedicated to black women's health and dealing with depression, respectively. We come from other great women, such as Marian Wright Edelman, Byllye Avery, Faye Wattleton, Johnetta Cole, and Lori Robinson. The list goes on and on and on. We come from a tradition of women who speak out.

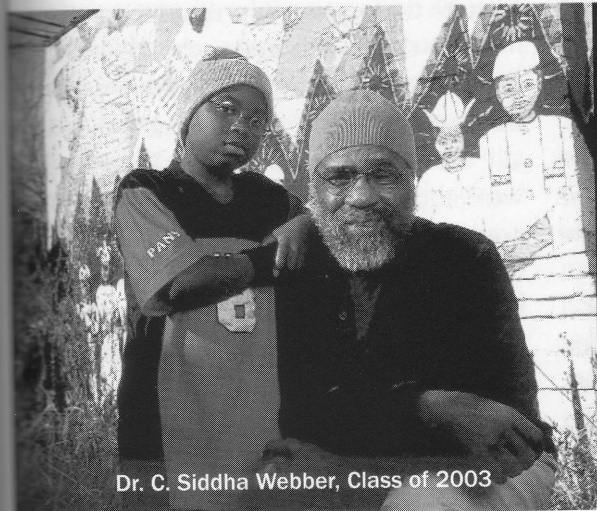
But there is yet another who spoke out against injustice! There was One who spoke out against unfairness and reminded us that everyone is our neighbor. There was One who spoke against the sexism that would

stone a woman for adultery but ignore the adultery of men. There was One who did not label a woman a sinner because her husbands had left her. There was One who dared to speak out!

And yes, there are casualties. When you speak out, there are risks! There may even be a crucifixion. But I'm so glad that we have the rewards of people who dared to speak out! I'm so glad that there are people who gave their lives so we could vote! I'm so glad that there are people who gave their lives so we could be free! I'm so glad there are people who spoke out so that we could also have the privilege to speak out! I'm so glad that someone spoke out so that we could be saved! I don't know about you, but I'm willing to speak out! Let's all speak out! ♦

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