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(v. 10) Then Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand.” So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. (v. 11) But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, “Come, lie with me, my sister.” (v. 12) She answered him, “No, my brother, do not force me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! (v. 13) As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.” (v. 14) But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

The African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” is taken literally in the African American Church. The entire community and congregation are responsible for the leadership development, spiritual enhancement, and biblical literacy of youth within and beyond the church walls. Youth Day is typically born out of substantive youth programming. Youth programming and special recognition days provide opportunities for the congregation and ministry leaders to address specific themes, concerns and issues that affect young people. The specifics for a Youth Day celebration vary. In some settings, the youth provide liturgical leadership for the planning and actual delivery during the worship moment. In this vein, adult participation is minimal. In other settings, adults plan youth services and tailor youth specific messages for the occasion. Youth Day in the African American context also serves to counter popular culture messages laden with violence, adverse images of beauty and questionable teachings about sex and sexuality. Historically, there have been two major purposes of annual youth days and youth programming in the African American Church: education and evangelism.

II. Biblical Interpretation of Preaching and Worship: 2 Samuel 13: 1-34
Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The cultural production of evil and its manifestations, (patriarchy, racial inequity and economic class ordering) continue to wreak havoc on twenty-first century youth and are daily played out as youth commit violent acts against each other and the wider community. This is the case domestically and globally. While watching the news, I was shocked to hear that an eight-year-old boy was being charged with the violent murder of his father and another adult. I experienced the same horror when I read that young men on a motorbike threw acid on Afghan schoolgirls.

Youth violence continues to explode, and rape, one of the most horrific youth crimes, is, in some cases, still not punishable as witnessed in 2 Samuel 13: 10-14. Young girls take on shame after being the victims of violence, and young boys, especially young black boys, misplace aggression as they work to escape the pipeline to prison.

As a parent and educator, I am extremely concerned that ours is a culture where self-indulgence is encouraged, violence glorified, the black female body exploited and material worth is constantly promoted. Youth programs and special recognition days for youth must work hard to quell the messages sent via irresponsible media moguls who constantly vie for space in the psyche of young people. Difficult work must be done to stop the distortion of sacred texts that further promote violence or minimize personal responsibility.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

2 Samuel is a continuation of 1 Samuel and should be read as such. Both books are a stream of consciousness that begin with King Saul and the division of Israel and highlight its unification under a young King David. 2 Samuel presents two sides of David. On one hand, it illumines the skill, passion and devotion David displays as a public leader. On the other hand, readers are introduced to his flawed private life that places his leadership in jeopardy and shines a clear spotlight on his lack of character.

2 Samuel 13:1-34 immediately follows the story of David’s misuse of executive power wherein he exploited the powerless position of a woman, hatched a plan that gained him the woman, who was the wife of one of his lead lieutenants, and had the lieutenant murdered. King David’s ridiculous choices become the backdrop for a violent offense and further exploitation of women in chapter 13:10-14. The three main characters of this text are King David’s children, Absalom, Tamar and Amnon. Amnon and Tamar were half-brother and sister. The reader is immediately met with a startling point. The scriptures record that Amnon fell in love with his sister Tamar. The key word is love. Verse two reveals that Amnon has mistaken lust for love. Amnon was tormented, because Tamar was a virgin that appeared to be untouchable. With the same craftiness his father David used to steal the lieutenant’s wife, Amnon concocts a scheme to get what he wants by any means necessary.

Lust gives way to hate. After Amnon rapes his sister he tells her to get out (v. 15). Rape in this context was not a punishable crime, even though its effects were brutally damaging and often exiled the victim. In fact, in 2 Samuel 13:31, we are told that David is furious, but no punishment
is undertaken for Amnon. Phyllis Trible sheds more light on the ever-escalating violence against Tamar and within the family after Absalom kills Amnon to avenge the rape of Tamar. David grieves the death of Amnon, but not the living death of Tamar. Trible writes, “The father identified with the son; the adulterer supports the rapist; male has joined male to deny justice for the female.”

As a woman, Tamar’s position in ancient society, and particularly within the royal family, was as an object. Biblical texts define women, named and unnamed, in terms of their relationships with men. Some women in the biblical narratives face humiliation and rape, as is the case of Tamar. Then, the scene moves from bad to worse in a matter of verses. When Amnon grabs hold of her and makes his request to lie with Tamar, she realizes the level of danger she’s facing. Violation appears to be inevitable. Yet she pleads, “Where will I take my shame?” Verses 10-14 engage us in Tamar’s attempt to rationalize with Amnon and to explain how horrible her life and his life would be if he were to rape her. Virginity was a prize status for women who had little else. To be violated in such a way would bring shame upon her, because she would be considered not good for marriage which, in that context, was one of two prescribed gender roles.

Violence—injurious physical, mental, emotional, or psychological action or treatment—works to restrict, thwart, or limit one’s freedoms. Amnon’s choice to violate Tamar restricted her future as a viable member of the community. His choice also limited her freedom to make decisions about her body. Tamar’s silence about what Amnon had done made her complicit in her own oppression. All of the characters in this sordid story are in need of serious help. David’s influence upon Amnon, as a father who took whatever he wanted, fuels Amnon to consider Tamar as a feat to be won. Absalom’s request for Tamar to remain silent (v. 20) is just as violent as the actual rape. Hence her shame remains bound with no outlet. Interestingly, God’s presence is not detected and, just as David remains silent when he is informed of Amnon’s actions, it seems as if God is also silent.

This text raises major theological concerns: where is God in the midst of violation and abuse of power? How do we teach our youth about gender equity, socio-religious notions of masculinity and femininity, sex and sexuality and patriarchy and exploitation? Amnon’s actions toward his sister Tamar are a display of his male privilege. All male power is located in and backed up by the institutional orders and cultural norms of society; male domination over women is realized in and through these institutions. For Amnon, this truth was realized within the institution of his family. As a young man, he’s already engaged in making choices that marginalize and oppress. Men first, women second, is individually and collectively vested in the concept of manhood, which is significantly based on and actualizes itself in the sexual degradation of the female sex.

Society and the Church most often fault youth who are violent. We do not begin with their parents who likely offered too little discipline, nurture, education, and spirituality. We do not begin with the Church which likely offered too little community, education, mentorship and spiritual examples of right-living for an explanation. We do hold accountable media which likely offered too few images that promoted positive relationships between black males and females and positive images of black youths. We, like David, are simply furious for a moment and the violence continues to escalate.
Challenge

Male violence and women’s oppression are prevalent in the biblical text and in our contemporary context. As leaders, parents and siblings how do we break the silence of violence within institutions? This is the challenge we are called to as believers. Also, before we can end violence in the wider society, the church must lead. Unless the Church takes a firm and clear stance against violence, young males will continue to exploit young women who believe silence is a virtue. Prolific writer Audre Lorde has written, “Your silence will not protect you…the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation…For it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: Screams of Tamar as she was forced, the pleasurable moans of Amnon the perpetrator (vv. 12 and 14);

Sights: A long robe with sleeves (the wardrobe of virgins) (v. 18); and

Smells: The smell of yeast from baked dough (v. 8).

Notes


3. Ibid., p. 27
4. Ibid., p. 154