

March 22, 2020

Psalm 143

Before I read Psalm 143, I want to lay some groundwork.

This week in our continuing Lenten sermon series, Living a Just Peace Life, we look at the justice commitment “opposing violence against women”. This is a no-brainer, right? Unlike struggling with racism, white privilege, and what that means for us, who isn’t opposed to violence against women. But, being opposed to it and doing something to oppose it are two very different things. Everyone thinks being a racist is bad, until they understand it systemically and how we unintentionally, and often unwillingly, unknowingly, support racism. This is true when we talk about violence against women. Violence against women is a systemic problem, grounded in a patriarchal system.

I want to share with you why this justice commitment is important to me, because it might resonate with you in a new way. My awareness of this issue became more than academic, when I was in college and watched the film “Deliverance”, specifically one scene. “Deliverance” was a film about four men in two canoes going down a white-water river for the last time before the river was damned up. For some reason the two canoes got separated and the first canoe was stopped by two “backwoods” locals, who tied the two canoeists to trees and proceeded to sodomize them.

As I watched that scene something clicked in me and I knew in my gut the horror of rape, the horror of being physically violated. Ever since that moment I have reacted with anger, and even rage, when confronted by the crime of rape.

Several years later I entered seminary and was confronted with feminist theology in the form of inclusive language. It was no longer acceptable to speak of God exclusively in the masculine gender, as God is male and female and more. God referred to only as he and Father supports the patriarchal system we live under; a system that not only allows for violence against women, it has encouraged it. At the time I was far enough along on my faith journey to see the truth in this and made a conscious effort to “clean up” my language. Personally, I found it to be a growing experience. As I sought to speak of God in gender inclusive terms, I became more aware of when and how I do speak about God, and my faith deepened.

As most of you are aware I have tried to share with you, in worship and in conversations, our need to speak of God in inclusive ways. When I read from scripture or print things in the bulletin, I use inclusive language.

All of this had been a rational answer to a perceived need: changing how we live in a patriarchal system. I thought I got it; that I was “enlightened”, but about 25 years ago I read a series of articles on rape. The one was written by a woman, who wrote of her experience of being raped at the age of 16. Let me share with you a little from her article:

“The evening I was raped all my feelings, all the stuff of my life, were tied up in small bundles and thrown into the river where I thought my body would be discarded by the man who raped me. I have spent much time since the rape looking for everything that was taken from me that night. (I used to say ‘everything I lost that night.’ But I didn’t lose anything. I am not that careless.)

“I can recall so many firsts since the rape. The first time I felt something other than numb. (I remember the physical pain in the days that followed the rape, and I remember how grateful I was for the physical pain to remind me that I was alive. The numbness in my head and heart could not be broken for many months.) The first time I wanted to commit suicide. ... The first time I slept through the night without seeing the dark shadows of a man with arms outstretched walking toward my bed (even now [14 years later] this is a recurring vision). The first time food actually had a taste to it (3 years after the rape). The first time I walked alone outside for a distance of more than 20 feet. (Although I have done this, I *never* feel at ease walking alone and rarely do.) ... The first time I looked at my father as Dad, not as a man with the physical capability to commit rape. ... The last time I said the Lord’s Prayer and included ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’”

When I had finished reading the articles, I showed them to Barbara and asked that she read them as well. She dropped what she had been doing and read them. When I asked what she thought of the articles, she looked at me with a questioning expression on her face and said, “Well, this isn’t anything new for you, is it? I live with the fear of this all the time. This is women’s daily fear, women’s experience. Why are you so amazed?”

I was shocked. I am still shocked. Women's fear, my spouse and my daughters' fear, was not front and center in my mind. It has been ever since, and has been a motivating force in my commitment to keeping opposing violence against women as part of Amicable's commitments as well.

Before I continue to what I believe are some of the things we can do to oppose violence against women, I think we are now in the right frame of mind to hear the words of the psalmist, who must have been a female victim of rape.

Read Psalm 143 from *The Message Bible*

Listen to this prayer of mine, God;

pay attention to what I'm asking.

Answer me – you're famous for your answers!

Do what's right for me.

But don't, please don't, haul me into court;

not a person alive would be acquitted there.

The enemy hunted me down;

he kicked me and stomped me within an inch of my life.

He put me in a black hole,

buried me like a corpse in that dungeon.

I sat there in despair, my spirit draining away,

my heart heavy, like lead.

I remembered the old days,

went over all you've done, pondered the ways you've worked,

Stretched out my hands to you,

as thirsty for you as a desert thirsty for rain.

Hurry with your answer, God!

I'm nearly at the end of my rope.

Don't turn away; don't ignore me!

That would be certain death.

If you wake me each morning with the sound of your loving voice,

I'll go to sleep each night trusting in you.

Point out the road I must travel;

I'm all ears, all eyes before you.

Save me from my enemies, God –

you're my only hope!

Teach me how to live to please you,

because you're my God.

Lead me by your blessed Spirit

into cleared and level pastureland.

Keep up your reputation, God - give me life!

In your justice, get me out of this trouble!

In your great love, vanquish my enemies;

make a clean sweep of those who harass me.

And why? Because I'm your servant (your child).

I do understand these words in a new way:

- Please don't haul me into court;
 - The enemy hunted me down;
 - he kicked me and stomped me within an inch of my life.
- He put me in a black hole,
buried me like a corpse in that dungeon.
I sat there in despair, my spirit draining away,
my heart heavy, like lead.

Women, who sit in despair like this, look to God, look to the church for a way out of despair, a way forward.

The truth is that the church has not only for far too long been silent about this violence, the church has been complicit. From Bible passages about wives being submissive to husbands to Original Sin, giving women the responsibility for the fallenness and evil in the world, to fathers giving their bridal daughters away to other men. The history of misogyny in the church is long and well-documented.

Like racism, violence against women is often so subtly systemic, we aren't even aware of how we support and encourage it.

We must speak up and out, as God's representatives here on earth.

When the psalmist calls out, saying, "Save me from my enemies" and "get me out of this trouble", the call is to us.

So, what are we to do?

- The first thing, primarily for men to do, is to accept this violence's systemic roots and try to see those roots in your own actions, and change.
- Ask the women in your lives about their fears. Listen carefully and be conscious of the problem when you are with your male friends. How do you talk about women with them?
- I have heard men and women, during the Democratic presidential primary, talk about how women are judged differently; how they are chastised or stigmatized, if they sound too aggressive. Paradoxically, we, as parents, encourage our daughters to be unafraid, to be more aggressive, to be like their male counterparts in order to get ahead. How many parents are encouraging their sons to take on those "feminine" traits, like listening, nurturing, being less aggressive, being more of a team player?
- Is your language inclusive? Do you say "chairman" instead of gender neutral "chair"? Instead of "manning a table" do you use "staff a table"? Do you still use the word "man" to refer to humanity, rather than using the term humanity? (Even Gene Roddenberry changed the wording of Star Trek in the 1980s to "to where no ONE has gone before".) Images for God in Hebrew and Christian scriptures are male and female and more. It would be a good exercise for you to practice dropping the male pronoun "he, him, his", when you speak about God. We need to do this especially in Sunday School.
- The most important thing to do, immediately, is not look the other way, when you see or hear about violence perpetrated against a woman or women. If you are fearful of stepping in or cannot in that moment, then call the police. Don't hesitate.
- Support laws that make it easier on women to go to court without fear of having to relive the trauma again.

It is important that we engage in this, that we make certain Amicable Church is not only a safe-place, a sanctuary, but also a place a woman knows she will be heard and believed. This is important because I do not want anyone to have to live through the psalmist's experience: "I sat there in despair, my spirit draining away, my heart heavy, like lead."

God has called us to be a sanctuary. I pray God gives us the strength, courage, and love we will need to live into this justice work. Amen.