



Remembering Tamar¹

DIANE JACOBSON

Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon loved her. Amnon was so distressed that he made himself ill on account of Tamar, his sister, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible in the eyes of Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, brother of David, and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so sullen morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "It's Tamar, the sister of Absalom, my brother, I, I love her." Then Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and make yourself ill; and when your father comes to see you, then say to him, 'Let Tamar, my sister, come and let her feed me bread, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see and eat from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down, and made himself ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Let Tamar, my sister, come and let her make two heart-cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand." Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to the home of Amnon, your brother, and prepare food for him."

So Tamar went to the house of Amnon, her brother, where he was lying. And she took the dough, and she kneaded it, and she made heart-cakes in his sight, and she baked the heart-cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out every man from me." So every man went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the cham-

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To remember Tamar and to tell the story of her rape is to say that we know, we understand, we see, and we name the truth—a truth the Bible continues to speak, no matter how painful.

ber, so that I may eat from your hand.” So Tamar took the heart-cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon, her brother. But when she came near him to feed him, he grabbed her and said to her, “Come, lie with me, my sister.”

She said to him, “No, my brother, do not rape me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not act like a fool! As for me, how could I bear my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.”

But he was not willing to listen to her voice; and being stronger than she, he raped her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with a very great hate. Indeed, the hate with which he hated her was even greater than the love with which he had loved her. Amnon said to her, “Get up! Get out!”

But she said to him, “No, my brother; for this evil in sending me away is greater than the other that you have done to me.” But he was not willing to listen to her.

He called his young man who served him and said, “Send this thing away from me, outside, and bolt the door after her.” (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for thus the virgin daughters of the king were clothed.) So his servant put her outside, and bolted the door after her.

Then Tamar put ashes on her head, and she tore the long robe that she was wearing. She placed her hand upon her head, and she went away, weeping as she went. Then Absalom, her brother, said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Then now, my sister, be still; he is your brother; do not set your heart on this matter.” So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in the house of Absalom, her brother. When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry, but he did not rebuke Amnon, his son, because he loved him, because he was his firstborn. Now Absalom did not speak to Amnon of either good nor ill; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped Tamar, his sister. (2 Sam 13:1–22; author’s translation)

Sad to say, the home is not always a happy place. Not everything basks in the warm glow of the family hearth. Violence lingers here as in all places. We wish it were not so. Those of us blessed with happy homes, together with those not so fortunate, want desperately for all homes to be places of safety and contentment. We sometimes think that if we just work hard enough, teach clearly enough, find just the right family program or emphasis, then our homes will stand as that beacon of hope in the midst of a dangerous world. But alas, danger lurks even here.

And as we come to expect from our beloved Scriptures, the word does not shrink before even this horror. Instead, the light of scriptural truth shines like a flashlight under the carpets, into the closets, beneath the sheets, even into the palace of the king. This, our Scripture, speaks the truth, no matter how painful.

And so we are confronted by this brutal story of incest and of rape in all of its painful detail. We are, in truth, taken into the heart of the rapist. We are shown the full force of his lust, which looks, at first, so much like love. But quickly we know that this love is false, for it produces in Amnon no thought for the other. He thinks

only of himself, of his own desire. He is sick with desire. We watch as he plots. We see Tamar through his eyes as he feigns illness and watches her bake cakes for him, ironically shaped into hearts. We watch as he sends his men out of the room; we watch as he makes demands, as he takes her by force. We watch as he refuses to be moved by appeals to reason, to law, to compassion. Then, once his lust has been satisfied, we hear that haunting line:

Then Amnon hated her with a very great hate. Indeed, the hate with which he hated her was even greater than the love with which he had loved her.

We come to see how closely love and hate are matched. And we see the utter cruelty of family violence. We watch as Amnon casts Tamar aside, calling her a thing, and commanding his servant to bar the door—his cruelty compounded, stripping the other not only of her clothes and her honor, but even of her humanity. We watch Amnon, because through this true portrayal of sin we viscerally learn the destructive power of self-centered love. Never has a rapist been painted more pointedly. Amnon is the very picture of a self-serving, lust-crazed miscreant, willing to violate both this woman and this home, to violate both the object of his purported love and the sacred trust of his people.

“This rape, this incest, this broken home is no private matter. Scripture allows for no public-private split.”

It would seem that Amnon is the only villain of our story, but family systems are rarely so simple. The other problematic character is more subtle and thus more likely to escape our notice. We know we are not like Amnon. But what of David, the father and the king? David, in this tale of family violence, is most present through his absence. Think with me. This is his palace, his home. These are his children, though in truth he does not claim them all. His sins in this text are three in number. First, he never sees Tamar as his daughter. He has two sons, Amnon and Absalom. Each time that Tamar is mentioned, we are told she is sister to Amnon, sister to Absalom. She is only seen as daughter to the king in the clothes she wears. David, who has eyes for so many other women, has no eyes at all for his own daughter. In not seeing Tamar as his child, beloved in her own right, David himself violates the home.

And second, David blithely sends her off to her brother Amnon, with nary a thought for her safety. He speaks only through a message, not directly, and treats her like a servant. He shows no interest in the details, no curiosity, no protective concern. And finally, to cap his pattern of neglect, David fails to punish Amnon, his beloved firstborn son. He fails to let his son’s sin bear the consequences demanded by law and justice. Once again, sin is connected to love. But unlike Amnon, whose love turns to lust, David commits the sin of loving his son too much and his daughter too little, to the detriment of the community. David’s is the sin of

misplaced love, the same failing noted by Matthew when Jesus instructs his followers to broaden their vision of family to take in the whole community. Here in our story we see the full force of ignoring that imperative. What follows from David's disproportionate love of son is war and havoc.

And we are thereby shown another truth. This rape, this incest, this broken home is no private matter. Scripture allows for no public-private split. We are not given the luxury of saying, "Oh this is just a family thing, a private story that affects no one besides ourselves." Oh no, as goes the home, so goes the whole society. Here we watch as lust and neglect combine with power to undermine the entire kingdom, the entire social structure. Here family violence leads to war. So also in our own time, the sins of rape and neglect and all those other private sins compound to undermine the whole. As surely as a thousand points of light can spread for good, so also darkness spreads its own destructive poison.

"The story as told insists that we do not look away from Tamar. God will not have us forget her."

But stop. Perhaps I go too far. I am tempted into realms of generalization. Let us return to the text before us. Our sacred word prevents us from escaping into the nameless, formless void lest we bypass compassion and lament. Our text speaks deeply of one crime. We have spoken of Amnon and David, but our story is above all about Tamar, sister of Amnon, sister of Absalom, unacknowledged daughter of the king. As surely as we watch Amnon, so also we watch Tamar. We watch as she obeys her father's directive. We watch as she bakes cakes for her bedridden brother. We listen to her pleading, "No, my brother, do not rape me; for such a thing is not done in Israel....As for me, how could I bear my shame?" We watch as her crying falls on deaf ears. We watch her raped; we watch her discarded; we watch her hidden away in the house of her other brother, who then takes matters into his own hands. We enter into her story, and we grieve with her and cry out with her, "O my brother!"

So powerfully are we drawn into compassion for Tamar that we know, deep in our souls, that though the law might have us believe that rape is a property crime against father, husband, or brother,² in truth the real victim is the one defiled. The story as told insists that we do not look away from Tamar. Rather we are invited into her grief and shame, and we know that God is with us there. God will not have us forget her.

So it is with our word of truth. These stories we so often overlook on Sunday

²The laws against rape are found in Exod 22:16–17 and Deut 22:22–29. In cases in which the woman is a virgin daughter, the father is seen as the one owed recompense, and the woman is subject to becoming the wife of her rapist unless the father is unwilling. If a woman is married, the sin is against the husband, and the woman is deemed guilty of adultery. In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 36–44, Judith Romney Wegner speaks of women's "sexual-reproductive function" as being the property of husband or father.

morning we neglect to our own peril. God would not have us forget. Remember Hagar. Remember Dinah. Remember Jephthah's daughter. Remember the Levite's concubine. Each story is told with such pathos as to conjure up the tears of Jesus as he weeps over Jerusalem. Each story calls to us to remember and to weep with God. Each reminds us that we cannot get to the hope and the promise of the gospel through bypassing the cross, by pretending that sin is absent and pain incidental. Each woman, named or nameless, carries in her story a piece of the broken world.

So it is with Tamar. While the world carries on the violence done to her, she carries the world's shame. The ray of hope is slim, but it is there. In the midst of the stories of war and slaughter that follow on this rape, we find a single verse that tells us, "There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. And she was a beautiful woman" (2 Sam 14:27). In the birth of her niece, Tamar is remembered, and in this acknowledgment is heard the promise that violence will not have the last word.

My friends, to remember is to give honor, to give voice, to give substance. To remember is to claim that this woman's story belongs at the heart of the story of God, whose compassion is never ending. To lament with Tamar and to remember is to say that God lives within the lives of the downtrodden and shamed. To remember and to tell this story is to say that we know, we understand, we see, and we name the truth. To remember is to receive her story as a gift offered to us in the tenderly cupped, yet bleeding hands of the Almighty, given into our care that we might practice the divine task of remembering.

Thanks be to God whose mercies never fail us. In Jesus' name. Amen ☩

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