

Sermon September 30, 2018
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First, a trigger warning: this morning's sermon is about sexual assault. If this will be too difficult for you to hear, please take care of yourself and do what you need to do. If you need to take a walk around our beautiful grounds, please feel welcome to do so.

A second trigger warning: there are those who prone to read partisanship into just about everything, and it is a shame that this week sexual abuse has become a partisan issue. Out of respect for those who suffer from the after-effects of abuse, please resist that temptation this morning. Instead, keep your eyes on Jesus and what he wants you to hear in all this.

This morning's passage from Mark may be one of the most important in scripture: *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."*

In this passage, Jesus is getting real.

It's not a "feel good" passage, nor is it meant to be.

Jesus is serious. He wants his disciples to know that when it comes to sinning against "these little ones who believe in [him]," it frankly doesn't get much worse.

You know, there was a time in my life when I thought, "Well, sin is sin. Jesus doesn't really outline a hierarchy."

But you know what? This passage may tell us that he does.

Yes, one could argue that he is being hyperbolic, but I'm not so sure.

He doesn't stop his illustration with the millstone; with suggesting that death is better than causing someone to stumble. He goes on: *"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell..."* I cannot recall another passage where Jesus uses such violent language. Either way, however, whether you take him literally or think he is speaking hyperbolically, the message is clear: do not mess with Jesus' "little ones"; do not mess with any of God's beloved.

I've thought about this passage quite a bit over the past 4-5 months. While I was on sabbatical, and unable to preach, all sorts of sexual assault cases and accusations were in the news: Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Kevin Spacey, Roger Ailes, the Roman Catholic diocese of Pennsylvania, and more. And of course now this week, sexual assault is in the news again on a daily basis, as the nation sits riveted to the Bret Kavanaugh hearings and the turmoil his nomination process has caused. Survivors of sexual assault have coined the new Twitter hashtag: #whyIdidntreport. Others have begun to come out and tell their very personal stories publically, frequently with graphic detail and anguished hearts. And still others have sat together, be it in living rooms, or coffee shops, or in our parish hall just this week, and told stories they've never spoken out loud;

the events of this week being so re-stimulating, that they find themselves feeling some of the same horrible emotions they felt so many years ago when they were attacked or abused.

So, I want to pause for just a moment and say...

If this is you: I want you to know that I am *so* sorry.

I know how hard this must be.

I believe you.

And, I am here for you if you would like to share your truth.

Which brings me to a very important point:

No matter what our current political and secular reality is telling us, Truth still actually matters.

Truth is still a power unto itself.

Truth is where God meets us.

In James' letter we hear him proclaim, "*My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul.*"

Wandering from the truth, and returning to the truth. Our commitment to and acknowledgment of the truth is where our salvation rests. God is truth.

"I believe Christine Blasey Ford," many t-shirts and Facebook profiles now announce. Others report they also believe Brett Kavanaugh and support his nomination. But somewhere, deep inside both of these people – lays a fundamental acknowledgment of the truth, and one either attempts to speak it out loud or attempts to cover it up. A person can weave explanations all day long but it does not change the fact that there is still something called truth.

But how, in this day and age of pathological dishonesty and claims of "fake news," and "alternative facts," are we to know what's true?

Here are a few things to assist us in this endeavor:

1. We can trust that we are hardwired, as humans, to recognize the truth.
St. Augustine wrote that knowing the truth was like remembering someone's name. I've used this illustration before. It bears repeating now. Just yesterday, I ran into someone at the Farmer's Market I had not seen in months and as she walked towards us, my mind ran through about 40 different possibilities for her name. When I finally landed on it – Michelle!! – I recognized it. I remembered it. Augustine says we come from truth and return to truth, and our whole lives are the journey back. It's in our DNA.
2. Telling the truth is often difficult. Reality rarely conforms to what is easiest or best for us. Think about how many times each day you cover over the truth in what we call white lies. "Thanks, Grandma, I love the sweater you sent!" or "No, I wasn't busy, so glad you called." Or our most frequent: "How are you?" "I'm great! I'm fine!" But the truth is not a story we get to control or an encounter we get to shape. The truth is simply the truth, and we realize it has power unto itself, which is why we might have a mixed relationship with it. For people who've been sexually assaulted or abused – indeed anyone who's

been traumatized, truth telling is exceptionally difficult. Your hands shake, your voice quivers, your insides tie up in a knot. It's no wonder that 63% of assaults are never reported to the police (and that number is 90% on college campuses).¹ Because when the courage is found to voice it, it is often too ugly a reality for others to accept – and they start trying to poke holes in it, or blaming us and thereby mitigating what actually occurred. That response – to reject the truth in favor of a lie -- is weakness. Make no mistake about it.

3. Even if everyone in the world failed to believe something that was true, it doesn't make it untrue. Jesus rose from the dead; how many people really believe this? Not very many! That doesn't make it untrue. If you've ever shared a story someone didn't believe, it doesn't make the story false. It simply makes them wrong in the not believing. Truth sets us free. Truth wins in the end. The truth has a power of itself, no matter what we might do to evade it or persuade ourselves otherwise.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center tells us that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be abused before they are 18, and that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. And you know what? The anecdotal conversations I've had with women I've encountered this week (not those who have sought me out but rather just those I've run into here or there) suggest that the prevalence may actually be worse. What a truly horrifying thought.

If this makes you angry - good. Jesus got angry at injustice. You should, too. Harness that anger to help change our culture of disrespect for women, young people, and minorities. 34% of those who abuse a child are family members of a child. They aren't random strangers, but rather trusted individuals. Be alert.

96% of those who abuse are male. That means you – men, boys, fathers – have a responsibility to use the power of your gender and your influence amongst your peers for good. To not only *not* participate in conversations that denigrate or sexualize women, but to go *full-on Jesus turning over the tables in the temple* if you see or hear something that just isn't right. Will you observe abuse happening before your very eyes? Doubtful. But you will hear denigrating comments towards women, and you will see them ignored and interrupted in board rooms, staff meetings, and other situations, so speak up. Surely, doing so is not more difficult than what a survivor has to do in telling his/her story.

Survivors: keep speaking your truth, in whatever version and to whichever audience you find most comfortable. Maybe that just means writing it down. If every story of assault, abuse, intimidation and harassment were to be told, would that not tip the scales in favor of truth and justice? Might that not unleash something holy?

Jesus is adamant that we not become obstacles to another's faith journey. That we do not lie to them or reject their truths. If we do, we have evicted ourselves from the grace only living in the truth can provide, and it would be better if a millstone were hung around our necks.

¹ All statistics used in this sermon were downloaded September 29, 2018 from <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

A lot is riding on the line this week.
I cannot say it will be easy to endure or watch, no matter where you stand.
And, the truth may not win. Lies might win.
And if they do, know that the God of love and justice and mercy and truth stands with the
righteous and the honest.
Make no mistake about that.
Dwell in God's abundant love.
Find comfort in it.
Call someone you trust.
Call me if you want.
And if somehow you find grace and hope and strength in the midst of it all, do what you can to
share it with those who need it most.

God is still good. God is still truth and love and justice and compassion and tender mercy. May
that truth give us all the comfort we need. Amen.