

# What Kind of Love Is This?

2 Samuel 13:1-22

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We may have reached a significant turning point in American culture. In recent weeks, multiple public figures have been accused of sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. Women and men of all ages have been sharing their personal stories under the hashtag #MeToo about the times they were victimized.

I was having beers the other week with the Dean of the Episcopal cathedral and he said that Christianity needs to confess our complicity in developing a culture of misogyny. Reflecting on this conversation, I realized I needed to say something from this pulpit.

So, I've set aside the sermon I had planned for today and am going to preach a different one. Five years ago, during a series we did on King David in the Hebrew Scriptures, I preached on the story of the Rape of Tamar. That sermon speaks to this cultural moment, so I have adapted it for reuse today.

Hear now the story of Tamar's Rape as recorded in the book of 2 Samuel:

David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'"

So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand." Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. 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. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."

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! 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." But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!" But she said to him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her." So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her.

But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.

When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

At the close of this terrifying story, we are told that despite being angry, David does not punish his son Amnon "because he loved him." Scholar Eugene Peterson asks directly, "What kind of love is this?" For the story does not tell us that David loved his daughter Tamar or that he took any compassion upon her. The Bible indicates that she lived out the rest of her life as a "desolate woman." "David's 'love'," and Eugene Peterson puts that word in quotes, "is a mask for injustice."

The story opens with Amnon expressing his *love* for Tamar. And we are shocked that the word isn't lust or obsession or even the more neutral desire. The word is "love." We are told that Amnon loves Tamar, before he rapes her, hates her, and abandons her to desolation. Indeed, we must ask, "What kind of love is this?"

Rape, abuse, sexual assault, and domestic violence are features of our contemporary life. 1/3 of women and 1 out of every 6 men have been victims of sexual violence. 60% of women experience unwanted sexual attention or harassment in the workplace.

Disturbingly, the perpetrators of these crimes often mask their actions with the word "love." Just like Amnon did in this story. We can say unequivocally that love should never involve violence. Love should never involve abuse. Love should never mean engaging in sex

when you don't want to. Love does not objectify you or depersonalize you. Love is not about power or control for one party and obedience or submission for the other party. Love never ignores your desires, your pleasure, your health and well-being.

Unfortunately, religion, including Christianity, has historically been guilty of fostering an environment where these abuses could occur. Christianity taught women to obey their husbands and to submit. It taught women that their pleasures and desires were secondary, maybe even sinful. It encouraged women to be silent, and more than one woman has heard a religious leader tell her that her experience of abuse or violence was "her cross to bear." Which is about as distorted and incorrect a reading of the cross of Jesus Christ as could ever be offered.

Christianity has done much the same with children. Too often children are taught that their obedience to authority is a requirement for eternal salvation. Children are not taught to appreciate, value, and understand their own bodies. They are denied comprehensive sex education by religious leaders. They are not taught to think critically.

People were also often victims of a theological distortion of the concept of sacrifice. Rather than focusing on Jesus' empowering life, which was supposed to invite us all into the kingdom of God to experience a new and abundant life, theology and spirituality too often focused on the sacrifice of Jesus and said that we should model that rather than Jesus' full life. If people, particularly women and children, found themselves the victims of abuse, then they were (and sometimes still are) consoled that this was their sacrifice that made them more Christ-like.

Men too are victims of this culture. Our culture has created a distorted image of masculinity which tells men that if they admit to times when they were victims, then they are less of a man. Our culture has reinforced images of masculinity that emphasize control, domination, and sexual power. Many boys grow up in our culture thinking that a "real man" can make others perform for his sexual pleasure.

Christianity has helped to reinforce these wider cultural notions and has contributed to them. Historically the mainstream faith did not develop a healthy approach to sex. Christianity also focused too often on obedience to a set of rules and dogmas, instead of living a whole and abundant life.

We must quit contributing to the problem with a theology that distorts the good news of Jesus Christ. Too often what has passed for "love" is not true love. So, what is?

St. Irenaeus, one of the most ancient of the church fathers, wrote, "For the glory of God is a humanity fully alive." The goal of the Christian church ought to be this – helping people to be more fully alive. True love leads to fuller life. True love saves us.

Theologian Monica Coleman writes that our goals for salvation must include "survival, quality of life, and wholeness." Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima-Brock write that we must "create places of hospitality for human flourishing" and learn "how to be present, how to choose life." A saving love is committed to justice and growing relationships of care. Theologian Catherine Keller writes that we need a powerful love that "resist[s] the forces of destruction, empower[s] the powerless, and embolden[s] the meek."

True love is patient; it is kind; it is joyful and hopeful. It is fun and enjoyable. It is pleasurable, for everyone involved. It enriches our life and makes us better people. It works

for justice and nurtures the hurting.

Saving love responds powerfully to the problems of rape, abuse, sexual assault, and domestic violence in our society. Saving love insists that all Christian teaching and practice be life-giving and add to human flourishing. Saving love provides care and healing for those who have been victimized. Saving love is what we need and what God desires of us.

Ironically, the model for this saving love is in this very story. Tamar is, throughout the story, a model of care and compassion. She comes to her sick brother to nurse him. She prepares a meal for him. Her actions are hospitable and generous. She stands up for herself; speaks up for herself -- demands her rights and her dignity. And when she is wronged, she speaks powerfully for justice and righteousness. She proclaims her violation aloud.

Neither David nor Amnon demonstrate anything like genuine love. Tamar is caring, generous, hospitable, nourishing, justice-seeking, and life-affirming. She contributes to human flourishing. We don't need to ask of Tamar, "What kind of love is this?" Because we recognize immediately that what she models is true love -- the kind that saves us.

As the people of God, let us commit to resisting the forces of destruction, empowering the powerless, and emboldening the meek. Let us create places of hospitality for human flourishing. Let us set as our goals survival, quality of life, and wholeness. And let us take Tamar as our model, so that our sister will be desolate no more. Let her love become the model so that others in our time and in the future before us might be saved.

Let us love as Tamar taught us, and together we will bring glory to God through a humanity that is fully alive.