

## **Where Does It Hurt?**

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*Readings: Excerpt, Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger (Rebecca Thraister); Psalm 26*

I was 10 years old when Professor Anita Hill sat in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee to testify about her experience being sexually harassed by then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. I knew nothing of the situation at the time and was peripherally aware of it as an adult until recently, when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward publicly to agree to testify of her own experience of sexual assault by now-Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. This particular situation has taken one of the darker turns in an already dark time in our modern political history: not only has the nation been glued to these hearings and journalistic reporting on both figures, Dr. Blasey Ford on one side and Judge Kavanaugh on the other, but the stakes in the outcome have never been higher. The past year in this country has witnessed an emergence of voices, primarily of women, who have survived sexual abuse and assault but who have never, until recently, felt comfortable giving voice to these experiences. Perhaps as an act of resistance or more likely an act of primordial self-preservation, women who have been prey to powerful men in their schools, work, faith institutions, and public life have responded with their voices to the fact that we as a nation put a publicly sexual predator in the White House, and we continue to allow it with impunity.

So when Dr. Blasey Ford agreed to testify to her experience, she agreed to put herself on trial. To testify was not merely to bear witness to a decent reason why an already powerful man should not be given more power based upon his character, but to be put on trial for daring to smear the name of said man in power. We are already holding a tenuous grasp on truth and fact, and when it comes to experiences of personal trauma, who is taken seriously and who is believed to be telling the truth depends largely on gender and class. Whether Dr. Blasey Ford's experience is a case of mistaken identity is, after the hearings, not only somewhat dubious given how little she had to lose, but actually less important than the glaring difference between how she and Judge Kavanaugh are perceived. One only has to go so far as to read the comments under articles and online recordings of Blasey Ford's testimony to see how searing the hatred of her really is. While

Kavanaugh has had his fair share of scorn too, the temperature around Blasey Ford has been much hotter, and much more cruel. From criticism of her hair to her voice, both men and women continue to pick her apart and delegitimize her sanity in what feels like an obvious objectification of a human being with everything to lose and nothing to gain. Megan Garber, one of the few female journalists who covered these hearings in *The Atlantic Monthly*, notes, “the event was a testament to the corroborative effects of power: the ease with which those who chair committees and run countries can rearrange the facts of the world until they conform to, and allegedly confirm, the tales told by the powerful.” Anne Branigin, a female journalist of color who writes for *The Root*, wrote an article after witnessing the testimony entitled “Brett Kavanaugh and America’s Insistence on White Male Virtue.” The rub, she notes, is in how calm, collegial, and dare I use the word passive Blasey Ford had to be in order to be taken seriously – while Kavanaugh presented rage, bluster, and appeared altogether unhinged. Such rage would most certainly have undermined Blasey Ford’s testimony had she presented in such an erratic manner; Kavanaugh’s, however, emboldened his. Lack of control was labeled “defiance,” a clear and reasonable defense against the outrage that he would be accused of such behavior. Even with the 100,000 pages of email records that indicate that he certainly had the ability, as all humans do, to be a great dad and coach and community volunteer and also be an aggressive frat boy. His bombast turned him into a victim; trending hashtags playing on support for Ford include #IStandWithKavanaugh and #BelieveHIM (capital HIM), bolstered by what supporters interpret as a trashing of one of our most noble tenets of justice: “innocent until proven guilty.” While the concern for upholding a person innocent until proven guilty is morally sound, here’s what must give us pause if we are to mine the depths of our moral courage concerning this argument: we have *never* had a justice system where all persons have been treated as innocent until proven guilty. The very assumption that this was once the case and is only now crumbling is a falsehood built on a particular location in our social fabric. For “innocent until proven guilty” has applied to a select group of people who have been afforded the privileges of economic comfort, of skin color, of gender. And while all people, *ALL people*, as creations of a loving God deserve to be heard, to be seen and to be valued, we must be clear that to respond in defense of a principle that has never been universally applicable is a dangerous and disingenuous path to navigate.

I understand on a human level where those supporting Kavanaugh are coming from, if their hearts are true; and I do not desire nor claim the right to prove his guilt or innocence. No person who strives to do right in the world, who raises children of his own, who interprets law to make decisions about the lives of others, wants to be seen as morally deficient, let alone consciously evil. But when we look at the context of Kavanaugh's past interpretations of law, which have historically erred on the side of protecting existing power structures through sacrificing the individual agency of more vulnerable parties, it becomes equally disturbing to deny that the reported behavior could have possibly existed, or even worse, to write off the behavior by normalizing the kind of aggression that male dominance has traditionally adhered to. Whether we agree with the judge's interpretations of law or not, he certainly upholds the social norms that in the last century have been called into question. We already know that our culture, no thanks to our religious traditions, is rooted in patriarchy, which is the conscious or unconscious belief that men are superior to women. As painful as this definition is to hear since American culture has on one hand largely agreed to pretend we no longer believe it, we are still very much held captive by legal precedents and moral assumptions that were formulated because of this construct. It does us no good to ignore the influence of patriarchy upon our justice system as well as our other social systems, including our schools and universities, our religious communities, and our family units. Ignoring them, or conversely lashing out in defense of a man who appears to have acted out as many young men whose behavior goes unchecked do, only serves to bury the difficult truth that we are not yet, in religious terms, righteous. That we are still in process. That we are deeply flawed in our social systems and that though we have come far from the misogyny of the last several centuries, we still have a tremendous amount of work ahead. The sin, the iniquity here is not simply in men behaving badly, or in painting the "straight white male" as collectively guilty no matter what they have or have not done. It is in refusing to take seriously the very complicated truth that we can be both well-meaning and terribly misguided; that we may do much good and much harm as well, which has always been in tension with the way we are conditioned to perceive powerful male figures. It is also in refusing to take seriously the very complicated truths of those who have been at the receiving end of such harm, because it is so difficult to admit that someone can be both good and evil, and to hold accountable those we whom we see as leaders.

I have to say that the psalm this week touches the heart of my own very complex feelings about the old “he said/she said” arguments that seem to find no resolution. Because this psalm is attributed to King David, whom our Jewish and Christian traditions hold up as one of our favorite kings, idealized as the upright and blameless leader. But the problem with this narrative is that David was both wonderful and horrible. As a young shepherd, David is said to be chosen by God because of his pure heart – winning a fight against the giant Goliath and gaining fame. But once David is crowned king, he does the reprehensible: he covets his general Uriah’s wife Bathsheba so much that he decides to sexually conquer her – whether she consented to this or not is never spoken of in scripture – and sends her husband to the front lines of battle where he is inevitably killed so David can have what he wanted. This is terrible, but it’s no unusual story. The heroes of Greek mythology do the same, and many ancient near-east mythological creation stories involve some kind of divine masculinity conquering divine femininity in a grand display of rage. Rage fueled not by simply aggression; this rage is inspired by a longstanding and deeply entrenched sense of entitlement. I hate the word “entitlement” because it has such negative connotations, but I use it here for its most raw meaning: the sense that one has a right, a claim, upon something, or someone. And this is what a patriarchal worldview assumes: David desired something and acted upon his right to have it. Judge Kavanaugh, accusations of assault aside, has shown the same kind of worldview: for instead of going through hearings with the dignity and grace of a person who is being considered for a job in *the* institution that purports to value reason over emotion – instead of showing the country how well he could handle the stress of a rigorous vetting process – he responded with rage. A rage fueled by a clear belief that he is owed this honor, not granted it as a privilege. A rage that says, *I deserve this, how dare you get in my way, this is mine*. A rage supported and applauded by so many – while Dr. Blasey Ford’s own rage, if it is there, dare not be uncovered for us to see.

As the scriptures tell it, King David suffers a great deal of consequences for his behavior with Bathsheba and Uriah. David’s first child with Bathsheba dies as an infant; later on his adult son Absalom is also killed in battle. God is said to have prevented David from building the Jerusalem temple for his transgressions; on his deathbed he counsels his son Solomon to live righteously and follow the ways of God. Yet tradition tends not to focus

on these messy shortcomings; instead, many psalms are attributed to King David as he was a skilled musician, and we lift up and celebrate his accomplishments while minimizing his rather terrible moral misdeeds. Maybe it's because of the psalms – for in them contain all the pathos of a soul struggling with doubt, with regret of terrible transgressions, and with, of course, rage. Jewish tradition upholds David to be the example of the power of repentance, as he asked forgiveness for his iniquities, and God eventually does forgive him. Whether or not he wrote Psalm 26, when I think about him praying these words to God – “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity...prove me, O Lord, and try me...I wash my hands in innocence...” it unearths my own complex feelings of grief, of shock, and especially my own rage for the sins of our ancestral fathers upon our ancestral mothers, and for the silent suffering that so many women have held with no one but God to hear their pain; with no one but God to know and to believe their experiences. It brings up complex feelings about what it means for the men who have transgressed to ask forgiveness, to ask, as David does, to be redeemed. But what it also reveals so clearly is that the healing begins with that very step: for the rage of women, as Rebecca Thraister so beautifully analyzes in our reading from her new book, has never been well-received. “It is order, after all,” she says, “that throughout our history has worked to suppress the anger of women, to discourage us from speaking it or even feeling it. And when women have gotten mad, they’ve been ignored or marginalized, laughed or blanched at, their vehement objections treated as irrational theater.” The healing only begins when this rage is taken seriously, and when the men involved mine their own capacity for vulnerability enough to listen; for culpability in their own wrongdoings; and to recognize that the cultural conditioning coloring all of our perceptions of gender and power are real and have real and lasting effects. It is akin to realizing that white supremacy is real, or that classism determines the fates of many, and that our social mores are shaped by these unappealing realities. Ruby Sales, civil rights activist and spiritual leader, found herself asking a young woman who came home from night after night of exhausted exploitation in order to make a living, “Where does it hurt?” No one had ever asked her friend this. Then she took the question to her fellow civil rights leaders and activists, men and women of color and white men and women who were hurt by white supremacy too – *where does it hurt?* “Where does it hurt?” might be our best in this moment. Crying the equivalent of “reverse racism” when

we are just beginning to break open the terrible truth of women's silence, and the pain and rage that wells beneath the surface of that silence, only serves to reinforce the sin of patriarchy. A sin that wounds us all, women and men alike. In a time like this, a moment in history where for trauma survivors time seems to hold one frozen in the remembering, frozen within old feelings that threaten to overtake the soul, the best that we can all do is ask, *where does it hurt?*; and then, actually, really, *listen*. From wherever you are coming, whatever skin you are in, *listen*. Listen to those who are crying out, I'm suffering, and I have to tell you about it. Listen to our own wounds if they are there, that are floating to the surface even when we want to bury them. Listen to the spirit that calls us, if we have been transgressors ourselves, to speak the truth, and to repair the breaches that we have wrought because there is surely something that hurts within us too. No one can take away the humanity of any of us, no matter what we've done or what's been done to us. It's not in our capacity to do so. What is in our capacity is to acknowledge what is hurting us all collectively, so that we can break open a space for our individual hurts as well. A space that says, yes, this is real. A space that says, yes, I believe your pain. A space that allows trauma to be felt, to be grieved, and to be, eventually and hopefully, released. A space that invites the divine Spirit to hold us where it hurts. It's in this space that we may find the freedom to break the chains of patriarchy that have held us, and hurt us, for so long.