

Sandra Stogsdill Brown

*Benjaminites Behaving Badly (And a Levite Who Wasn't Too Great Either)*

Part I: Judges 19:22-30

July 28, 2018

Today's story comes from the book of Judges. If we look at a timeline of the Bible, it would look something like this: We start at the beginning with the book of Genesis and God creating the heavens and the earth, and human beings. We've got the call of Abraham, the ancestor of our faith to whom God said, "I will make you a great nation, and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

Then we have the stories of Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's offspring who become the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob and his sons end up in Egypt, and eventually the Egyptians oppress and enslave them for about four hundred years, and then we get Moses and the story of the Exodus, when God brings the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. The newly freed people wander in the wilderness for 40 years, where they receive God's instructions for how to live. God is very clear with them: God is their God, and they are to live as God's holy people. They are to have no other gods, besides God, no matter how many gods the other nations have, and they are to love their neighbors as themselves, and they are also to love the foreigner, because they themselves were foreigners in the land of Egypt.

During this time, God chooses one tribe out of the 12 to serve as priests, and that tribe is the tribe of Levi, which is the tribe of Moses and his brother Aaron, who becomes the first priest. Priests had the special job of mediating between the people and God. They officiated at worship, making sure sacrifices were performed correctly. They served as military chaplains. They had the job of deciding when a person was healed of a contagious illness, and was safe to come

back into the community. Priests taught the people what was holy and what was common, what was clean and what was unclean.

This was a high-stakes calling. If the people did not do what God commanded them to do, they would no longer be a holy people. If there is no distinction between the way the people of Israel live and the way their enemies live, why should God protect them from those enemies?

So the Levites, as members of the priestly tribe, were pretty important.

Where were we?

OK, after the death of Moses, Joshua leads the people into the promised land. And there they settle, each tribe in a different area. However, the Israelites fail to completely drive out the Canaanite people who were already living there. So even as they settle down and build towns and plant crops, the Israelites still have to deal with these different groups of people around them.

Then come the days of the Judges. These weren't judges like we think of today, sitting in a courtroom and pounding a gavel. They were more like military leaders. And the book of Judges follows a clear pattern. First, Israel acts unfaithfully by worshiping other gods. This was always a strong temptation for them because they had not driven out all the Canaanite people like they were supposed to. They would see their Canaanite neighbors worshiping these other gods, and they wanted to do that, too. Next, because they were unfaithful, God would give them up to their enemies. Then, the people suffer and cry out to God. Then God would send a judge who delivered them from their enemies. There would be peace for a while, and then the cycle would start all over again. Twelve times this happens, and this is where we get the stories of people like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. And over and over again, we hear this phrase: In those days, when there was no king in Israel. . . meaning, yes, there is the law, but there is no institution in place to enforce it.

Today's story comes near the end of the book of Judges. There is no king in Israel, and at the moment, there isn't even a judge. And in those days, so the story begins, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim—that's in the northern part of Israel—took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah—that's in the southern part of Israel.

Another way to describe a concubine is "secondary wife." She is legally married, but doesn't have the same status as a primary wife. This particular concubine is not happy with this Levite, but women did not have the right to divorce their husbands in those days, so she simply leaves and goes back to her father's house in Bethlehem. After a few months, the text says, the Levite "set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back." He arrives at her father's house, and the father is delighted to see him. So far so good.

The father keeps the Levite at his home, eating and drinking, for several days. Finally one afternoon, the Levite insists on leaving, even though it's late in the day. He and his secondary wife and his servant and the donkeys head north for Ephraim, but it's clear they aren't going to make it before the sun goes down. His servant says, "Hey, let's spend the night over here, in the city of the Jebusites." But his master, the Levite, says, "No, that's a city of foreigners. Those aren't Israelites." They keep going until finally they reach a town called Gibeah, which belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. That's an Israelite town, so surely they'll be safe there. But when they get there, nobody offers to take them in except an old man from the hill country of Ephraim, where the Levite himself is from. He then does all the things a good host should do—feeds the donkeys, provides water for them to wash their feet, and offers them food and drink. As the story continues, hear now the word of the Lord as it comes to us from Judges 19:22-30. . .

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." But the men would not listen to him.

So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. "Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer.

Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'"

Here ends the second reading.

If this story sounded familiar, that's because it sounds an awful lot like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the book of Genesis. It's got the same situation of someone coming to town, and no one offering hospitality except a foreigner in that town. It's got the same grotesque violation of the sacred code of hospitality, with the men of the town wanting to rape the Levite, because in those days and sometimes still today, the way to utterly and completely humiliate and emasculate a man is to treat him like a woman. And once again, the host feels such

a strong sense of obligation that he offers up his daughter rather than see his guest harmed.

But in this story, there is no divine intervention at the last minute to save the woman. In fact, God doesn't appear at all in this story. God isn't even mentioned, and this is no accident.

Earlier in the book of Judges, women are doing fairly well. One of them even becomes a judge herself. But as the book continues, Israel's unfaithfulness gets worse and worse, and so does its treatment of women, as many scholars have pointed out. In this story, it's not just the Benjaminites who behave badly; it's the Levite, whose tribe has the sacred task of keeping the people holy. Aside from seizing the woman and throwing her out to literally save his own behind, there's his behavior the next day. What kind of a man goes to sleep at night knowing his secondary wife is outside being abused? Or gets ready in the morning without first opening the door to see where she might be, how she is? Or says to her, "Get up," when she is found lying at the door with her hands on the threshold? How does he not at least pick her up and carry her inside?

When and how exactly, did the woman die? Was it while she still lay on the doorstep? If she was clearly dead, why did the Levite even bother telling her to get up? Was it somewhere on the long donkey ride home, while her wounds went untended? Or was it when the Levite got her home and cut her up?

There's another big difference between this story and the story of Lot and the men of Sodom. That is—this isn't a story about Sodom. This time it's an Israelite town that has mistreated another Israelite. They're from different tribes. But they are all descendants of Jacob.

The people whom God had brought out of slavery, out of the land of Egypt, the people God had called to be a holy people, set apart and blessed in order to be a blessing, have now become just as bad as the men of the city of Sodom,

generations before. As the concubine lies on the ground, so the people of Israel have hit bottom. There's no bright side to this story. There's not supposed to be.

Contrast this story with the story of Jesus in our Gospel reading today. In Judges 19, a woman is treated as property from start to finish. The man she belongs to--because she's a concubine, and he does not belong to her—SACRIFICES HER in order to protect himself. In the time of Jesus, when women still depended on men for their sustenance and couldn't legally inherit anything, a widow losing her only son was sad, AND it was an economic disaster for her. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus brings a MAN to life in order to protect a WOMAN. . . kind of a neat little reversal there.

If there is any takeaway to this story, we can find it in the deterioration of the role of women throughout the book of Judges. They start out strong and end up in pieces. We ignore this at our peril. The human tendency to de-humanize other human beings is not something that you deal with once and it's gone. Today, 30% of the world's women experience physical or sexual violence from their intimate partners. Every 98 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted. Every year, more than 80,000 inmates experience sexual violence, with 60% of those attacks being perpetrated by jail or prison staff.

The fact that there are more women in positions of leadership than ever before does not mean that sexism is nothing to worry about anymore. The fact that we have had an African American president doesn't mean racism has been overcome. If we're tired of hearing about sexism and racism, just imagine how exhausted the people who live on the receiving end of these things must be. As Christians, we don't get to side-step these hard-to-talk about topics, anymore than we would step over a dying woman on our doorstep.

Now, if you were a member of one of the tribes of Israel, and your town received one of the 12 pieces of the Levite's concubine, what would you do?

What's the most helpful, most faithful response you could make? What are the odds that's what the tribes of Israel did? Come back next week and watch how the Israelites break the glass floor on their way to an all-time low and learn why this story matters today more than we think. . .