

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Next to all the political stuff in this week's news has been the story about Brock Turner, a college freshman who drank too much at a frat party one night and ended up behind a dumpster in an alley raping a woman who had also had too much to drink and who, for all practical purposes, was unconscious. Unfortunately, this sort of thing happens a lot in our country—both date rape and rape of women who have never before seen their assailant as was the case here. Turner had never met the woman he raped and according to her the two of them hadn't been introduced or even spoken with each other. Regardless of the circumstances before the rape, he clearly took advantage of her. Something in his mind told him he could have her, and he violated her in a brutal, thoughtless way. If you have not read the stories about this crime, I encourage you to do so, and especially to read both the letter written to the perpetrator by the victim and the letter written by the perpetrator's father to the judge. I hope that you will be outraged when you do.

There are parallels to this tragic story in the lesson we hear today from First Kings. King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard to use as a vegetable garden. Ahab asked Naboth to give it to him and Naboth declined, as was his right, because it was his ancestral inheritance, precious to him and irreplaceable. Ahab went home to sulk about it like a small child. When his wife, Queen Jezebel, discovered why he was upset, she took matters into her own hands by arranged for false accusations to be brought against Naboth, accusations that ultimately led to his death by stoning.

The similarity between these two stories is found in the blatant abuse of power in both incidents. Naboth had something Ahab wanted and through the actions of his wily wife Jezebel, he was able to get it. In the case of Brock Turner and the unidentified woman who didn't know what happened to her until she found herself in a hospital emergency room, the power was much the same. "I *can* do this, and so I will." In neither case does there seem to be any consideration of the repercussions; Ahab and Jezebel seem to have no thought about Naboth's life or how his family will exist without him. In the modern day rape story, there was apparently no thought to what would happen next, certainly not about how the victim would be affected. In the First Kings story, the victim lost his life; the victim of our modern-day rape story kept her life, but lost her hopes and dreams—her future because of someone else's actions.

There will be repercussions for Ahab. If we continue reading about him in First Kings, we learn that God's promises of vindication on Naboth's behalf were very specific: that the dogs would lap up Ahab's blood in the same place where Naboth lost his life, that dogs would eat Jezebel and others who belonged to Ahab's family, and that others of their family would be eaten by birds. Pretty gruesome stuff, huh? The threat of it was enough to make Ahab tear his clothes and put on sackcloth, to fast and be miserable. When God saw Ahab's humility, how Ahab had reacted to God's terrifying promises, God relented, deferring the punishment to Ahab's son and his house Ahab's death.

What does the future hold for Brock Turner? His promising swim career is a lost dream. For the rest of his life he'll be known as a sex offender. Oh—he'll also a little time in the county jail, an outrageously short sentence, for which he should probably be very thankful. But in his letter to the judge following the sentence, Turner's father wrote that "it is a steep price to pay for twenty minutes of action," and that "it will forever alter where he can live, visit, work, and how he will be able to interact with people and organizations." Suddenly this young man has identified himself as victim of his own crime! There seems to be no remorse, no real accountability for what he has done, not even an acknowledgment that it was wrong.

We often read of violence in the Old Testament, where there is lots of it. Sometimes it seems kind of like the wild, wild West, with God eventually riding in on a white horse like the sheriff in cowboy movies. In scripture we also see plenty of evidence of God's righteousness and fairness, and we believe that in the end God *will* be fair and righteous, although that often means fair to us and righteous to someone who has wronged us or someone like Brock Turner who has offended our sensibilities. We like to say things like "what goes around comes around," and "he/she will have to answer to God for that someday." We find that same mindset at the dinner table in the home of Simon the Pharisee. When this woman, identified as a sinner, comes in and bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with ointment. To me the bizarre part of this scenario is not that she's a sinner, but that she comes in off the street and begins ministering to our Lord. Simon, however, is appalled that Jesus is letting her touch him, and takes advantage of an opportunity to teach the Pharisee about forgiveness. It's a lesson for us, too, and a reminder that our Lord's lessons cannot be heard too often.

Like most stories of our Lord's life and lessons, we can approach this in a number of ways. The most obvious here is about forgiveness, and we can see it as the center from which all the other actions here are considered and interpreted, including love, hospitality, judgment and gratitude. Whether we are forgiving or forgiven, the withholding of forgiveness impacts our lives. Today's lesson seems to be told from the point of view of the one who has been forgiven. But in truth, the one doing the forgiving is affected as much if not more than the one being forgiven, and when forgiveness is withheld, the person who withholds it is usually the one who suffers from it. Such is the case with Brock Turner's unnamed victim. For now, she is unable to forgive him, but she believes she will one day. Once she does, she'll be able to move forward in her life. It's unlikely that she'll ever feel love for Mr. Turner and it's certain she'll never forget what happened to her, but letting go of her anger and bitterness will free her from the tremendous burden of anger and hate.

Several years ago I told our children a story that I think bears repeating, two stories actually. The first is about a boy who was hitting golf balls in his back yard. One of them hit the skylight of a neighbor's house down the street. It was unintentional, of course, an accident. The boy went to the neighbor and apologized, but the neighbor was furious and insisted that the boy pay for the damage. The neighbor stayed furious until he was paid, and even afterward, every time he thought about it. He carried it around with him, told his friends about it. It somehow became a defining moment of his life in that neighborhood, long after the boy had forgotten it.

Another story is about some children who were playing football in their back yard. One of them threw a pass right toward the hands of another who was ready to catch it. But just as the ball reached his hands, another boy tackled him. The ball flew out of his arms and went right through a neighbor's window. It was unintentional, an accident, just as the golf ball going through the skylight had been in the first story, and the children went to the neighbor and apologized. Here's where the stories differ. This neighbor offered his forgiveness and told the children he knew it had been an accident. And then he offered to take down the fence between their yards so the children would have a bigger area for football.

Forgiveness is letting go of your anger or hurt or damages if someone does something that offends you. Forgiving is giving by the person who was hurt. Forgiving enables us to heal our own hurts, too. We cannot make another person accountable for what they have done, but in forgiving them, we relinquish our part of a hurtful experience. Let it go! Jesus said that a person who is forgiven little will love little, and a person who is forgiven a lot will love a lot. He didn't suggest that we think about forgiving, he didn't present it as an option. It's one of those things that is required of us as followers of Jesus, perhaps one of the hardest. How can we say that we are following Jesus if we don't at least try it? Even more, how can we ask our Lord for forgiveness if we cannot forgive others?

Forgive us our sins, Lord, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.