

## 2009 National Sermon Contest Winner

In her sermon, “The Silence We Keep,” Protestant pastor MarQuita A. Carmichael Burton uses the biblical character of Tamar to challenge her listeners to break the silence surrounding child sexual abuse. Tamar, raped by her brother, is counseled to keep silent by her other brother. The subsequent isolation does not serve her well. This sermon is a good example of using a biblical story to initiate a discussion that is uncomfortable and difficult but very necessary.

### **The Silence We Keep**

**2 Samuel 13:19-20**

*by Rev. MarQuita A. Carmichael Burton*

My dear friends, in this passage of sacred text we find Absalom giving counsel to his sister Tamar who has been forcibly raped by her brother Amnon in the household of her father, King David. Absalom sees his flesh and blood in the worst condition of her life. She has been violated in the house of the King, a place one presumes offers safety and protection for womankind in a patriarchal society. Tamar is certainly bedraggled, surely bruised and humiliated. Our sister has torn the beautiful garment that only the King’s daughters were allowed to wear. Absalom’s sister has rent her garment of diverse colors and gone about wailing loudly as the outward sign that something terrible has happened to her in the household of the King. The salve and the balm Absalom applies to Tamar’s pain, frustration and agony is for her to keep silent about this thing. Her silence results in her desolation.

Just like our sister Tamar, we have a tendency to devalue our existence by keeping silent about childhood sexual abuses we have suffered, in order to avoid exposing our families to public humiliation. As African Americans we place greater value on the opinions of those we love as an entity, as opposed to the individuals who constitute our “skin and kin.”<sup>1</sup> Oftentimes the feelings of certain relatives determine whether we use our voices to defend ourselves or remain silenced victims. There are occasions when higher priority is given the needs or desires of the elders over getting the help we desperately need to be restored.

By not revealing the crimes of childhood sexual assault committed against us by members of our own clans, and to avoid being ostracized, as black and brown people we ignore the trauma inflicted upon the very people we profess to love. Our women and children, boys and girls, become expendable when the dictation of the collective supersedes the healing of the unprotected. To avoid the additional burden and blame of being considered the source of the family’s dysfunction, many survivors keep the silence even as adults. We allow a core faction to sanction whether we utilize our voices to secure the resources we need for our own healing or

whether we will be bound forever remaining silenced, agreeing to keep the secrets of our perpetrators.

For instance, as we maintain our silence even as adults, and continue to repress our emotions by keeping silent, some of us may find ourselves living in fear and self-imposed isolation. If our caretakers did not love, or were untrustworthy and inconsistent in their care of us, we became cautious of them. Perhaps we became wary of other people and assumed they too could not be trusted thereby leading us to be careful and then suspicious of everyone. Some of us became very lonely people. We would often choose to avoid being included in family gatherings and declining invitations from those who would befriend us. Now others of us, by not revealing the crime of sexual molestation committed within the confines of our households by its own members, "learned to become fearful and withdrawn from others."<sup>2</sup> Our capacity to receive and to give love is severely handicapped. This is evidenced by our difficulties to engage in or maintain healthy intimate relationships with friends or lovers. A few of us understand the gamut of responses ranging from promiscuity on one end of the spectrum to hypersensitivity, abstaining from all forms of physical contact and mutual sharing on the other. When we endure violations at early ages without receiving the help we need to know the truth that we are not at fault, we did not invite the abuse, and we did not deserve the violence, our formation becomes severely warped. In our isolation, people become means to an end and sex becomes a weapon or a tool far, far from its intended purpose. Additionally, many other survivors wrestle with internalized guilt and shame which may lead to post traumatic stress disorders and psychological challenges that can only be overcome with professional assistance. Outward manifestations of our trauma are often the root causes of obesity, hypertension and overall poor health and self esteem.

"We may be the epitome of the Jones, living high on the hill, or Joe and Josephine Public, struggling to get out of the projects and off welfare. Doesn't matter. If we allow a space for our children to be vulnerable and then turn our eyes from their signs of distress, abusers can strike in our homes, under our noses."<sup>3</sup> If we create sacred spaces for our beloved babies, our future generation, to be loved, nurtured and safe, then turn a blind eye while they are being sexually assaulted, we become just like the silent partner in a gang rape with our silence signaling our consent. If we continue in this way, generations of our kindred will suffer wounds of the heart and mind that the body cannot easily expel. Our communities and households will continue to lose its great thinkers, dreamers, preachers, artists, daughters and sons because of the psychological and spiritual damage inflicted upon them in nests that have become so defiled by incest, molestation and sexual violence that they can no longer nurture them. If we do not change the dysfunctional course we have embarked upon perpetrators will be free to abuse more children, the cycle of violence, unchecked, will continue and millions of our clan and tribe will suffer in silence and not get the help they need to be restored to wholeness.

Therefore, since we see how sexual assault and violence against women and children can devastate individuals, communities and destroy families, we no longer give assent to the power of silence to cripple and confuse us. Because we acknowledge the inalienable right and mandate

to speak truth to power, and we know that it is the truth that makes us free. We choose to collectively confesses with Sister Audre Lorde that, "Our silence cannot save us." We reclaim our voices and shatter the façade of the deadly silence we keep. "There is no way to speak and do the truth in an oppressive society without offending the people who are responsible for that oppression" and since "there comes a time when our silence is betrayal,"<sup>4</sup> we trade in our torn robes and ashes for a bull horn and a listening ear and tell the truth of our story so that our souls, minds, bodies and the people we say we love might be healed. As former silenced victims choose to no longer acquiesce to the demands of the clan elders and refuse to prescribe to the false healing promised by our conspiratorial muteness, we move forward to reclaim freedom and wholeness on our terms because we need it and so does the village.

Tamar lived in patriarchal times and within a situation of life far different from our lives today. Our response to sexual violence within our family does not have to be the same as hers. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman Davis suggests that while "it is unfortunate that Tamar's community forced her to carry the guilt and shame and forced her to live her life as a desolate woman living in her bother Absalom's house," that does not have to be our present reality. As the virgin daughter of the King, her options were limited yet as an honored and beloved daughter of *THE KING* our options can be far different.

The first step we may consider in our quest for wholeness and restoration of our whole selves, our best selves, is to understand that we cannot wait for someone else to rescue and heal us. We must begin that work on our own and with the primary step being Assessing our Present Selves. Undertaking the task of self-assessment is critical in any effort of recovery. An honest, critical evaluation of who we are and how we have become this one is essential to our self-reconciliatory work. Writing our stories down in an unedited free writing style is helpful because it allows us to revisit those fearful and tearful places within the safety of ink and paper. Every violation, every time, every name can be written without retribution and the truth of the story can finally be revealed and released from its hiding place within our body. Whatever we have lost or been stripped of can be and must be reclaimed. My sisters and brothers, we can begin shattering the façade of the safety of silence with the first stroke of our pens. Tell the story.

Accepting the Findings will be the paramount second leg of our journey to free ourselves from the silences we have kept. Once the story has been told and written down and told to someone in authority, we can no longer pretend "as if this true story never happened."<sup>5</sup> Once we know something we cannot unknow it."<sup>6</sup> We must press onward even if we have to cry the whole way through. Once the perpetrator is revealed and uncovered, people will have a harder time pretending the crime did not happen. Do not carry the weight and burden of guilt and shame for crimes you did not commit. Dr. Bridgeman Davis says, "Exposing is important." An African proverb warns that a person who conceals their illness cannot expect to be healed. If we consent to stay hushed about our abuses and violent life disruptions, we cannot expect to truly enter into wholeness.

Next, if we are certain that we want to be made whole, we must Associate with Healing Professionals. As survivors we must understand that we are not responsible for the sexual violations that we suffered and that things outside of our control at that time must be addressed in order for us to become fully integrated and resurrected. Today we assume responsibility for how we think, feel, act and how we choose to live our lives. A nest may be required for us to do our work in safety because we need to be able to understand and express our anger, fear, frustration and other emotions with a serious intent to resolve them. This can be found in a network of supporting friends and family members in addition to a licensed, professional counselor we trust to walk with us as we navigate this leg of our journey. During this time we have to be intentional about establishing safety, remembering what has happened, mourning our loss of innocence, reconstructing our own life story removing the abuse as the central focus of our entire life event. Developing coping skills and reconnecting with normal life within the safety nest can get us farther along the path to improved health and well being.

Finally, we must embrace the holiness and sacredness of loving ourselves by connecting to spiritual truths like those found in Baby Sugg's prayer and blessing for the people in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. 'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh...Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them...Pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that neither. You got to love it, you! ...More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.'" <sup>7</sup>

*Rev. MarQuita A. Carmichael Burton is a native of Arlington, Virginia, who enjoys sharing her life with her husband of 21 years, Anthony, and their son, Anthony. She is an associate minister of the Pilgrim Journey Baptist Church, where Rev. Angelo V. Chatmon is pastor. She was the founding pastor of the Vineyard Ministries in Richmond before furthering her chaplaincy in Clinical Pastoral Education at the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, California.*

*Rev. Carmichael Burton completed her Masters of Divinity degree at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University and is the author of A Drop of Oil as well as being selected as a contributor in Dr. Ella P. Mitchell's Those Preaching Women Volume 5.*

*Recreationally, Rev. Carmichael Burton enjoys writing, reading, photography, horseback riding and swimming. She intends to pursue a Masters of Social Work degree and a PhD in Pastoral Care and Counseling. She is undergirded by the scripture found in 1 Corinthians 9:16, "For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel," and Isaiah 61's mandate to bind up the broken hearted and to set at liberty those held captive. It is with great humility and devotion she endeavors to fulfill the call upon her life.*

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<sup>1</sup> Canon, Katie G. Washington National Cathedral, May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Norman H. *Making Peace With Your Past*. Baker Book House Publishing: 1985, pp. 156–157.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, Robin D. *No Secrets, No Lies*. Broadway Books, Random House Publishing: United States of America, 2004, pp. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Cone, James H. *The Vocation of a Theologian*. Union News, Winter 1991, pp. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Canon, Katie G. *As If This True Story Never Happened*.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Berneice (Dr. Bridgeman Davis' mother).

<sup>7</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House Books: New York, 1987, 2004, pp. 103–104.