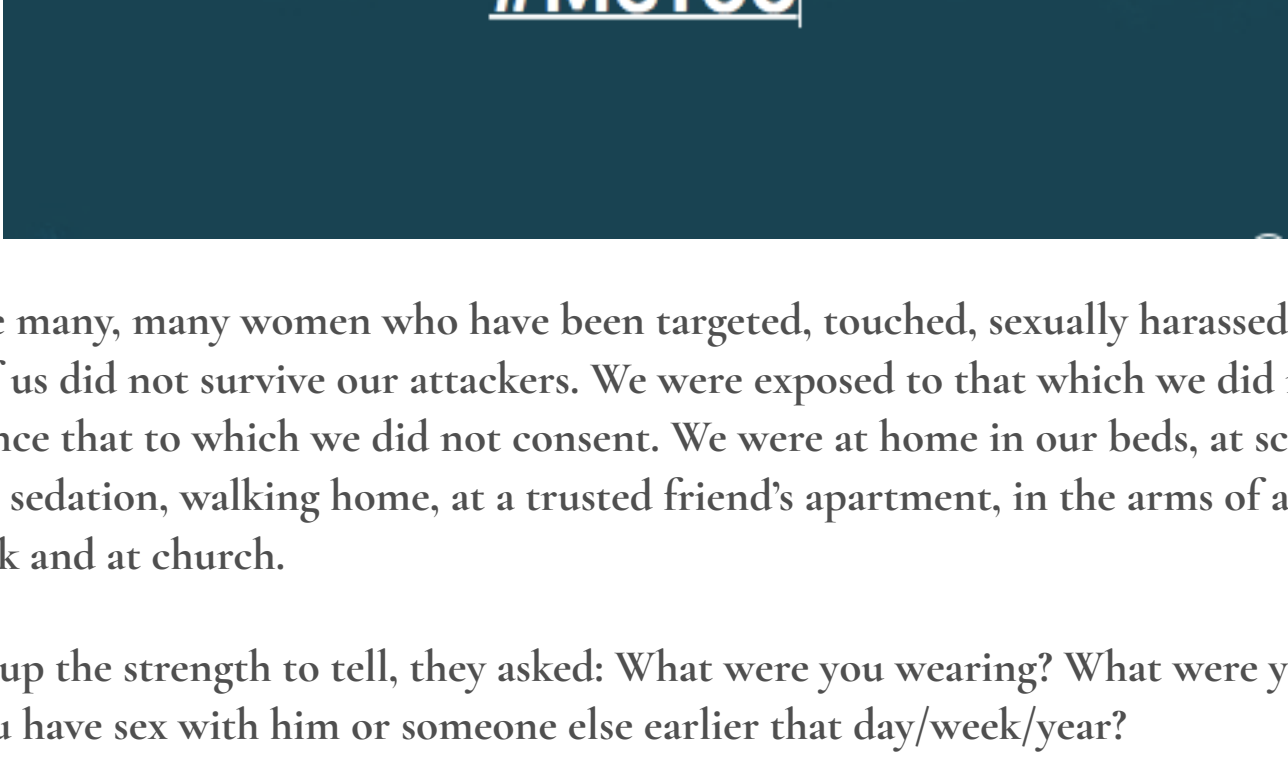


## The Forehead of a Whore

by Wil | October 22, 2017 | Sermon | 9



#MeToo. I am one of the many, many women who have been targeted, touched, sexually harassed or assaulted and lived to tell the tale. But all of us did not survive our attackers. We were exposed to that which we did not want to see or touch, forced to experience that to which we did not consent. We were at home in our beds, at school in the bathroom, in the doctor's office under sedation, walking home, at a trusted friend's apartment, in the arms of a lover, on our grandfather's lap, at work and at church.

And when we mustered up the strength to tell, they asked: What were you wearing? What were you doing there/with him/that late? Didn't you have sex with him or someone else earlier that day/week/year?

As a biblical scholar, what I hear them saying, those folks who ask why you didn't tell then don't believe you when you do, what I hear them saying is: *You have the forehead of a whore.*

Have you ever noticed that Israel and Judah become female when the prophets want to use sexualized rhetoric to shame and verbally batter them? On the one hand it's: *out of Egypt have I called my son* (Hosea 11:1), and on the other: *You have polluted the land with your whoring* (here in Jeremiah 3). It is: *I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob*, (Mic 2:12), and: *a spirit of whoredom has led my people astray*, (Hos 4:12). There is: *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?* (Hos 11:8) And then there is: *you have the forehead of a whore and you refuse to be ashamed*.

When we talk about the rape culture that permeates every facet of our society—and we need to talk about it—we also need to talk about the rape culture that permeates the text we hold sacred and acknowledge that every sexist and misogynistic reading of scripture is not merely a matter of poor biblical interpretation. Sometimes the trouble is in the text itself. But I believe in a God, who though she can be found in, and is revealed by the text, is not limited to or by the text and its limitations. I believe in a God who transcends the text and is not revealed in literal or literary rape rhetoric.

I also believe Jeremiah's preaching would benefit if he had a womanist conversation partner. A womanist is a black woman whose feminism is so rich, deep, thick, broad, and wide, it moves beyond the mere self-interest of paler feminisms to embrace the wellbeing of the whole community. Womanism is brash, bold, and brazen—like the forehead of a whore. Womanism is womanish and talks back—with a hand upon her hip. And if you don't mind, I'm going to be so womanist, so womanish, that I'm going to talk back to Jeremiah this morning. And I just believe that the God who answered Rebekah's prayer when she thought her pregnancy was going to kill her can bear the weight of critical reflection. It's a mighty poor excuse for a god that cannot bear scrutiny.

So let us take a womanist walk through the text together. In our lesson today, Jeremiah is speaking out of his culture and identity. He is saying: In my time, men don't take a woman black whom they have divorced, and even those who would and not if she has moved on to someone else. But I am here to tell you this morning that God will take us back no matter where we have gone, what we have done, or what has been done to us.

Jeremiah is saying a woman who has moved on is polluted. But I am here to tell you what our ancestors passed down because womanist wisdom is motherwit and ancestral wisdom: the love of God reaches from the uttermost to the gutter-most. Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, to keep God's from loving you.

In Jeremiah's sermonie analogy, the woman like—some in his congregation and perhaps in this one—was put out. We know that because women in ancient Israel didn't have the ability to divorce. They were divorced. And now that she has moved on and picked up the pieces of her life the best way she knows how, he wants to call her out of her name. You know black women don't stand for that.

Abandoned black women have been making a way out of no way while being called out of our names for more than four hundred years on this continent. And even if some daughter of God chooses a strategy for survival that does not represent the best God has in store for her, she is still never separate from the love or faithfulness of God.

Jeremiah's analogy doesn't hold water with me because doesn't break God's promises, commitments or covenants. God has never divorced or abandoned God's people. But God's people have been hurt, on God's watch. Israel and Judah fell. Their people were enslaved by one regime after another, defeated, deported, disbanded, diasporized. Their daughters subject to all the violence Jeremiah uses in his sermon. We too have been harmed. Our people were subject to the same depredations.

Jeremiah here is like a lot of folk who want to know what no did that made it possible for this catastrophe to happen to you. He sounds almost like a prosperity preacher. He asks with no pastoral presence whatsoever, *where have you not been violated?* Jeremiah is confusing sex and rape and blaming the cast off woman for what has happened to her in his own metaphor. For Jeremiah, like some folk in our time, being raped makes you a whore. In verse 2, the word *shugalit* is passive. (The root **שגל** means abducted and ravaged.) It means to have been violated. You didn't do it; it was done to you. There is no preposition indicating participation, no "with," no consent. When Isaiah uses the same word the text says, "ravished," (Isa 13:16); in Zechariah (14:2) it is "raped." The reason some women and men can't stand up and say #MeToo is some folk will blame them for their own rape thinking and saying: *You have the forehead of a whore.*

Bishop Yvette Flunder taught us that as preachers and theologians the prophets and epistle-writing apostles are our colleagues and we can respectfully disagree with them. I say to Jeremiah what I would say to any preacher, male or female, ancient or contemporary, you don't have to sexualize, brutalize, or slut-shame women to call the people back to the God who loves them more parent or partner. Your prophetic vocabulary is too rich to be limited to that misanthropic trope. You can do better. You need to do better. God's people deserve better. And God requires better of you. Stop being petty Jeremiah. Jealous ex doesn't look good on God. God is bigger than that.

Some might say that's just the way it was or everybody spoke like that back then. After all we're talking about the Iron Age, not the most progressive of times. Well I'm here to tell you that the prophets Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Nathan, Gad, Iddo, Elijah, Elisha, Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi never once fixed their lips to pass off their pornotropic fantasies as the word of God. Jesus never used that language, perhaps because that's how some folk talked about his mama.

Not all prophets use the specter of rape as God's punishment for sin. Not all prophets call God's people whores. But Jeremiah did and he wasn't alone; Isaiah and Ezekiel, Hosea and Nahum fall into what I call homiletical heresy. Out of one side of their mouths they proclaim Israel and Judah are God's beloved daughters. On the other side of their mouths, or perhaps talking out of their necks, when Israel and Judah fall and fail as do all finite and frail human beings and institutions, they suddenly become these brazen whores who deserve to be beaten and raped because that's what you do when you catch your woman cheating on you, in their world view which is not mine, nor is it God's, in spite of what texts like these say. The very idea is rooted in the sanctification of physical and sexual domestic violence.

The Dean of womanist biblical interpretation, the Rev. Dr. Renita Weems taught us why the prophets use such language, (in *Battered Love*). They did the best they knew if not the best they could. They used what they saw in their world and in themselves, and recounted a God who looked more like an Iron Age warrior king bigger and badder than the one next door than a God whose grace and mercy are sufficient and unmerited. They used human relational paradigms to describe their relationship with God but humans and our institutions are fatally flawed. Humans can turn any relationship, system or institution designed for love and nurture, caring, companionship, and mutual support, liberation and justice, into violent abusive parodies of their intended purpose. All of the models Israel has given us are flawed because they are human as we are human.

We say God is the righteous judge of all flesh. But we know that justice is not blind. She sees skin color and bank balances and perverts justice accordingly. We know that judges are partial and though we may say that God is not, we like Israel expect God to judge in our favor whether we are right or wrong.

We say God is our parent, some say father; some say mother. Our ancestors said God is a mother to the motherless and a father to the fatherless. But sadly we know mother and father are not always pillars of safety and security. They can be violent, abusive, and emotionally crippling. The scriptures portray God as loving father but also one who rages against his children. And like any other Iron Age male in the bible God is invested in controlling the sexual purity of women whose value is tied up in their virginity, ability to make babies, and the degree to which they were under male control. Interestingly, when the scriptures portray God as mother she is not as violent.

We have been taught to say God is king but kings in the ancient world were warlords who secured their thrones with the broken and battered bodies of their enemies, often killing their wives and children.

We have been taught to say God is lord and master but those are slaveholding terms. And slaves in the ancient world as in our own ancestry were used like beasts of burden, maimed, raped, sold, and killed with neither thought nor consequence. Even when lord becomes a title of nobility it still rests on the notion of some human beings lorded over others.

We have been taught to say God is husband but it is in the role of husband that the prophets who proclaim liberation also proclaim words of violence rooted in violence against women and call it the word of God.

*You have the forehead of a whore...*

Jeremiah heard and spoke for God in and through the vernacular of his culture. From our perch in this century we see and hear differently through our own vernacular. I know it seem like I've been rough on Jeremiah. But I'm not giving up on him anymore than I'm giving up on any other passage in the bible that fails to live up to or into God's liberating love. I'm just going to follow the example of Jesus who said, *you have seen it written, but I say unto you...*

You have seen it written, "You have the forehead of a whore." But I say unto you:

You have the forehead of the kind of woman some men, especially religious men like Jeremiah, will call a whore. You have the forehead of a woman who will make her own decisions about her body and sexuality. You have the forehead of a woman who will decide for herself whether or when to have children. You have the forehead of a woman who will not submit to male domination in or out of the sacred texts. You have the forehead of a woman who will resist theology and biblical interpretation that does not affirm who you are, who and how you love, or who God created you to be. You have the forehead of a woman whom men will call a whore to put you in your place. You have the forehead of a woman who is unbothered and unbossed. You have the forehead of a woman who has survived rape and sexual assault and domestic violence. You have the forehead of a woman who has been blamed for the violence others visited upon her person and who brazenly rejected it.

You are brazen in your womanishness. You brazenly talk back to the text and its God. You brazenly talk back to Jeremiah and say you can miss me with that whore talk. And you can tell him: But I'm with you on the God who calls backsliders (מְשֻׁבָּרִים) and backstabbers (בִּגְדָנִים) to faithfulness. I'm down with the God who says, *I will not fall on you in anger, for I am faithful*. And yes, you can have it both ways. You don't have to subject yourself to Iron Age brutality or theology to turn to the God Jeremiah burdens with the biases of his culture.

At the end of our lesson God promises to give her people shepherds after her own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. In Jeremiah's context, that meant restoring the monarchy, but those days are long gone. In our time shepherds are priests, preachers, and pastors, not presidents or potentates.

Through Jeremiah who has survived this womanist critique, God promises to send us shepherds who will feed us with knowledge and understanding. I know there are some shepherds out there preaching like it's still the Iron Age, talking about women and our bodies like we're everything but daughters of God. But when God sends the shepherd, her heart will be patterned after God's heart and she will leave you with knowledge not shame, understanding, not name-calling.

Then we can create a world where all men teach other men and boys not to rape, where there are no women or men, girls or boys who are violated or violate another's body or consent. Then we will stop equating rape with sex. Then we will stop punishing women for being raped or having sex. Then we will hear women and men who say #MeToo. Then we will be empowered to use the richness of our theological imaginations to name God in ways that don't hurt or harm.

Jewish poet Ruth Brin, (*A Woman's Meditation*), put it this way:  
*When men were children, they thought of God as a father; When men were slaves, they thought of God as a master; When men were subjects, they thought of God as a king.  
But I am a woman come not a slave, not a subject, not a child who longs for God as father or mother. I might imagine God as a teacher or friend, but those images, like king, master, father or mother, are too small for me now. God is the force of motion and light in the universe;  
God is the strength of life on our planet; God is the power moving us to do good; God is the source of love springing up in us. God is far beyond what we can comprehend.*

No one has the right to call you a whore to put you in the place they think you belong. But if they do, tell them: I have the forehead of a whore and I am not ashamed.

*Jeremiah 31 Look here! If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her?  
Would not such a land be greatly polluted?  
You have played the whore with many lovers; would you return to me, says the Holy One.  
2 Lift your eyes upon the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been violated?  
By the waysides you have sat waiting for lovers, like a woman in the wilderness.  
You have polluted the land with your whoring and wickedness.  
3 So, rain showers have been withheld, and the late rain has not come;  
yet you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed.  
4 Have you not just now called to me, "My Father, you are the companion of my youth!"  
5 Will God be angry forever, will God rage for eternity?"  
This is how you have spoken, but you have done all the evil you could.  
6 The Holy One said to me in the days of King Josiah, "Have you seen what backsliding Israel did, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and whored there? 7 I said, 'After she has done all this she will return to me'; but she did not return, and her backstabbing sister Judah saw it. 8 Surely I saw it; for because of all the adulteries backsliding Israel committed, I put her out and gave her a divorce decree; yet her backstabbing sister Judah did not fear, so she also went and whored. 9 Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and wood. 10 Yet for all this her backstabbing sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in deceit," says the Holy One.  
11 "Then the Holy One said to me, ðœBacksliding Israel has shown herself less guilty than backstabbing Judah. 12 Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say:  
Turn back, backsliding Israel, says the Holy One; I will not be angry forever.  
13 I will not fall on you in anger, for I am faithful, says the Holy One; I will not be angry forever.  
14 I only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the Holy One your God, and there are paths to you for strangers scattered under every green tree, and my voice you all have not obeyed," says the Holy One.  
14 Return, O backsliding children, says the Holy One,  
for I am your master; I will take you all,  
one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you all to Zion.  
15 And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*

Translation by the Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D.+

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**Wil**

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**Robin Gorsline**

OCTOBER 23, 2017 10:21 AM

Thank you for this powerful reflection!!

**shalomfamilyministries**

OCTOBER 23, 2017 6:09 PM

Awesome word...thank you for your strong voice. It is an inspiration to me.

**Rachel Miller Jacobs**

OCTOBER 24, 2017 3:18 PM

Preach it, Wil!

**Renee C. Jackson**

OCTOBER 26, 2017 9:30 AM

Awsome! The kind of preaching my spirit has yearned for.

**terrence threadwell. D.Min**

SEPTEMBER 28, 2018 8:17 PM

Amazing sermon. I learned something I never knew.

**Dave Canan**

SEPTEMBER 30, 2018 12:25 PM

I would love to hear this preached by you. Is there a recording available?

**Phoebe Knopf**

JANUARY 24, 2019 2:09 PM

Thank you SO much for writing and posting this wonderful sermon which is, to this survivor, the holy, justice-affirming lightning of resurrection, not only for me but for all who care to rise up.

**annie c**

APRIL 6, 2019 12:17 AM

This was very powerful to me. I stopped going to church because it was just pablum. Nothing like these words. I want to believe in a God of justice who will pay us back for our trauma and suffering. It is a long battle against an entrenched, sometimes subtle enemy. All humans deserve respect.

**Vanessa**

MAY 15, 2019 11:22 AM

Powerful! So very powerful! I'd love to hear you preach in person.

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