

“With You Always”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
June 15, 2014 Trinity Sunday, Father’s Day, Year A

Psalm 8

Matthew 28:16-20

A few weeks ago a young man, a student in Santa Barbara, California, killed six people and wounded 13 others before taking his own life. This set off a national debate, but this time it wasn’t just about gun violence. The killer had posted online that he wanted to punish women for denying him sex, and punish men who had access to women, while he did not. Clearly the young man had serious mental health issues. But many people claim that regardless of his mental state, this act also reflected a culture that encourages male aggression and a sense of sexual entitlement.

After the attack, some people tweeted under the hashtag #NotAllMen, insisting that not all men commit such crimes. That is obvious. In response someone else created a hashtag #YesAllWomen, because of course not all men do these things, but yes all women are affected by some men’s sense of entitlement. Within days, millions of women tweeted their experiences of being attacked or harassed by some of these men. And many people who read the accounts said they had not been aware of what so many women endure, be it subtle or overt. This sparked a round of reflections and think pieces by both men and women about the larger cultural meaning of this violent combination of lust, rage and hatred of women.

One article in particular caught my attention. It’s by Ross Douthat, titled “Prisoners of Sex.”* Douthat wrote about the tension between our culture’s official attitude toward sex, and our actual patterns of sexual and romantic life. Our culture treats sex as the source and goal of a good life, something that everyone needs to be happy and free, whether you are a care-free college student or a Cialis-taking senior. But we also live at a time where more and more people are single, and it’s a fact that on average, single people have a lot less sex than people who have long-term partners or are married. So we have a situation where many men feel they are failing to live up to this definition of manhood, and this creates a lot of misery and anger.

Douthat adds that it doesn’t help for feminists to lecture men about respecting women. What men need, he says, is first to find a reason to respect themselves as men, that doesn’t depend on being sexually active. He writes that when sex and self-respect are so closely bound together, we end up with less sex, and less self-respect.

Now I don’t pretend to be an expert on all things male. I grew up in a family of four girls, my own three children are girls, and I admit, some men are still a mystery to me. But I have been happily married to one man for 35 years, and I think I understand him pretty well. And I do know what our faith teaches.

This morning we read from Psalm 8, a reflection on the nature of man. In Hebrew it’s “adam,” which can also mean mankind or humanity. We read, “What is man, or what

are human beings, that you (O God) are mindful of them, and the son of man, or mortals, that you care for them?” What does it mean to be a man (or a woman for that matter)? We start with the basics, what it means to be a human being.

When you read Psalm 8, you can imagine someone standing outside on a starry night, looking up at the vast expanse of the universe. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;” what is one human being that God should pay attention to him? To be human means to be aware of our place in the world. We should not think of ourselves as more important than we are. We are just one small dot in infinite space. And we are mortal, only here for a brief moment. As human beings, we are not to overestimate our own importance or be misled by delusions of grandeur. To be human means to have a sense of awe, and to be humble before God.

But – then we also have verse 5 which says, “Yet, you have made (human beings) a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.” Yes, we are small and weak. But we are not insignificant. We are made in God’s image. God honors and cares for us. And God gives us unique responsibility on this earth, as it says in verse 6 “You have given (human beings) dominion” over the earth.

Now to have dominion does not mean that we are allowed to do whatever we want, even exploit or trample the earth, or seek our own good at the expense of others. The earth belongs to God, and everyone and everything in it. But God gives us power and authority to care for the earth, and to be responsible for our fellow creatures. To be human means to be humble in relationship to God, but also to know we are powerful and strong. Now I’m not just talking about physical strength, although that’s part of it. We need people who can do the heavy lifting. But strength goes much deeper than that. We can also have strength of will, determination and grit. We can have moral strength and spiritual strength. And God has given us responsibility to use our strength and abilities to bring about good.

Men of faith find their identity and self-respect in relation to God, and in using their strength to provide and care for God’s creation, including other people. Sex may be part of a man’s identity. But it’s not the goal, or an achievement that defines who he is. And it’s never something a man is entitled to. It is meant to grow out of a relationship of care and love for a fellow human being, made in God’s image.

There are all sorts of men in the Bible, and many of them would not make good role models. But as Christians we can look to Jesus to show us what it means to be truly human, and also what it means to be a man. By the way, we know nothing about Jesus’ sex life. Whatever it was, or was not, is not important to the story. There are many other things to admire about him. We can look to his integrity, his sense of purpose, his clarity and strength in the face of opposition, his concern and love for all kinds of people, and his passion for God and faithfulness to the end. Those are qualities that can give any man a sense of respect.

Tom read this morning Jesus' final words to his disciples. This is Matthew's version of the Pentecost story. In this version Jesus met his disciples on a mountain in Galilee after he rose from the dead. He said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And then he commanded them to go out and make disciples, to baptize and teach people how to live according to God's ways. Jesus wants his disciples to have an effect on the world, to persuade others, to call for commitment, and to train people for action. And he promised, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We human beings are complex, whether we are men, women, or something in between. And sometimes it takes a while for people to figure out who they are in this world and where they fit in. But to all of us Jesus offers his presence and gives us authority and power to do good.

Today is Father's Day, but in the Presbyterian Church we also call it "Men of the Church" day, because not all men are fathers. But every grown man is a role model to children. So let us honor men for the things Jesus showed us: integrity, purpose, clarity, strength, and faithfulness to the end. And know that Christ's power and presence are with us, even to the end of the age. Amen.

"Douthat, Ross, "Prisoners of Sex", *The New York Times*, May 31, 2014, Sunday Review op-ed.