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Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ
Bethesda, Maryland

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10:00 AM

“The High Bar of Low Expectations”

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- Luke 18:9-14

This sermon will not win any rhetoric awards. It is not especially poetic or artistic or clever in any way. This will be a rather straightforward sermon. And painful and uncomfortable for us. It may be more call to confession and lament. I pray it will be hopeful and I pray it will be honest. I’m afraid it will leave us all deeply unsatisfied—and sometimes that’s okay.

Two weeks and two days ago, we were bombarded with the vile and vulgar recording of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump making horrific comments about women during an off-camera moment on an entertainment show a few years back—making horrific, sexist comments and bragging about his own ability to sexually assault women.

Those comments came to light on Friday, October 7. I wrestled with what to say about those words for my sermon on October 9. Ultimately for that Sunday I decided not to mention those despicable words. I made that decision for three reasons.

First, I think that one of the things that we need at Westmoreland is a sense of sanctuary. We live in this great and terrible city where the political clamor is so loud and many of us are so caught up in the campaign and other parts of life. Part of what we are called to be here is a respite, a place of respite from all of that. So I was hesitant to allow Mr. Trump's vulgarity to invade our time and space.

The second reason I didn't want to mention those comments on the 9th is similar to the first—That is, I don't want Donald Trump or any politician from any party to set the agenda for the church. We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are not the Church of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party or of the United States. Our agenda must be the Good News of God. It is very easy to be distracted from that.

The third reason I hesitated to mention Mr. Trump's comments on the Sunday after they came to light is because I wanted to make sure I was speaking from the right place within myself as best I can. I have strongly held and sometimes very partisan political views, as do some of you. I wanted to make sure that I was able to hear the Spirit of God whispering to my soul. Not just the blaring of the TV or the echoing of my own preconceived political notions.

So after Mr. Trump's comments were heard on October 7, I said nothing about them in my sermon on October 9. I am grateful that John Forrest Douglas – a former staff member who was here that Sunday and who voiced our congregational prayer – offered that episode and this turmoil around it to God in prayer and cast it as a wretchedness in need of divine attention.

Last Sunday the 16th I was away with many of you at our church retreat – a great weekend, by the way, and had no preaching duties.

And here we are today, reading these words from the Lectionary scripture. And Jesus is speaking “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

I cannot help but hear – in this snapshot from the Gospel written 2000 years ago – a foreshadowing of the despicable discourse we have heard over the past two weeks.

For a man to force himself on women because his celebrity or fame or power is to “regard others with contempt.”

Let me be clear: Donald Trump – a candidate of one of our two major political parties – degraded women and bragged about his willingness and ability to commit sexual assault. That type of gross behavior must be called out for what it is – contemptuous, wrong, illegal, and sinful.

But this must be said: Sexual assault is not a partisan issue and it is not bound to this election cycle. From Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with a woman he claimed to “own” as a slave to Lyndon Johnson’s waywardness and beyond, the presidency has been inhabited by men whose sexual relations defy the definition of mutual, committed, consensual adult behavior. History books and news shows and the whispering that we share in the halls of power point out that our fair city is plagued with sexism and awful acts of assault.

So to single out Donald Trump is not a partisan effort, and it is not the identification of a new problem.

Let me also say that I am aware of the privilege and sanctity of the ballot box. I would never presume to tell you who to vote for. That would be a violation of IRS regulations. Moreover – far more importantly – it would be a violation of your freedom of conscience as a child of God.

The sad truth is that Mr. Trump's comments are not the result of partisan leanings. They are not new. And they do not belong only to the realm of politics.

No, my friends, what we have seen and heard is a human problem, and a theological problem. To me theology is not a conversation about God. Theology is a conversation about people and how they interact with each other and with God. Sexual assault is a theological problem because it is a problem of poverty of spirit. It is a problem of our failure to see the beauty and inclusivity of God's creation.

“In the beginning God created humanity in God's image. In the image of God, God created them. Male and female God created them.” So says the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 27. That is one of the ancient Hebrew statements of the beauty and equality of God's creation.

And yet we have consistently, horribly distorted that ancient vision.

We need to be honest, that's a beautiful line in Genesis 1. Here in Genesis the writer sings about the equality of the sexes. But there are other places in the Bible where women were treated as chattel, where girls are sacrificed simply to protect men, where women's bodies are abused by men, and where brave women are simply left unnamed and their gifts go unnoticed.

And we need to be honest about the history of the Christian church. Once the Bible was written and the canon was closed, the church chose often to focus on those lines of power and inequality rather than the songs of equality and creative blessing.

For 2000 years women have been denied leadership roles in the church. Women's voices have been silenced in the church. Women have been abused by the church.

Beyond the realm of religion, we live in a world where women are not paid the same as men. Women are not given the same job opportunities as men. Women do not share equally in governing roles with men. In too many ways and too many places, women still go unnamed and unheard. (It does not escape the irony of the male preacher that he is saying that.)

We in the United Church of Christ have done some work to rectify that. Some *good* work. But we have not done *enough* work. The United Church of Christ – our denominational home – and the Christian Church globally – have failed to be a *full* voice for equality, respect, and honor for women. The church is called to be salt and leaven in the world, but we have been too bland and inactive.

So, it comes as no surprise that the presidential candidate spews such garbage, because there are few voices offering alternatives.

As I am sure the women in this room know all too well, that is the painful reality of the world in which we live.

As a man I must say to women, I am sorry.

And as a man, I must say to other men, This is our fault; and we must do better.

The day after Donald Trump's audio and video tapes came out, a writer named Kelly Oxford tweeted out a simple sentence. She tweeted, "Women, tweet me your first assaults. They aren't just stats. I'll go first." And in 140 character she described how a man on a bus assaulted her...when she was 12.

Within 24 hours, a million women had shared their stories of sexual assault on Twitter. A million women. A million stories told in just 24 hours. (I overheard a woman telling a similar story in our 9:00 study this morning.) This is a plague.

The days after Donald Trump's statements aired, calls to sexual assault hotlines increased by 33%.

In three weeks, the presidential election will be over. (Please God!) And, God willing, we as a nation will be able to focus on the political issues that the campaign has raised – income inequality, the cost of higher education, treatment of immigrants, finding paths to peace in the world. On another level, this election has also called forth racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia and sexism and a bubbling discontent. May God help us as we address those civic problems.

In the middle of that, however we go forward, we must remember that this other vital issue has been raised in these very personal and shocking and horrific ways: the issue of sexual assault. We must not forget the anger and shock at hearing that tape two weeks ago. We must not think that if one man's words and actions are called out, this plague will go away. We must not ignore or forget the millions of women who have told their stories and those who have not yet felt safe enough to tell them.

As the church, we must find ways to respond.

So what do we do? As I said, this sermon is mostly confession and lament. But we also seek a glimmer of hope in looking for a path forward. So what do we do?

First, as Christians, we recognize that sexual assault is a theological problem, as I have said. This is not a political problem. When one person degrades or belittles or harms another person, that is a denial of God's creative blessing.

We are made in the image of God. Male and female are reflections of the Holy. Humanity is filled with divine love. And so to hate or to harm another person is to fail to see God in another person.

“God be merciful to me, a sinner” the taxpayer said in our scripture passage. The plague of sexual assault calls us to struggle with the sinfulness of humanity – our inability to see God in each other and in the world.

When I first began thinking about this sermon, when I first read the Lectionary scripture passage, weeks before Trump’s videotape came out, I entitled the sermon, “The High Bar of Low Expectations.” I had thought I would focus on the tax collector’s confession, “Be merciful on me, a sinner.” I thought I would work with this idea that we all sin, we all fall short, we all miss the mark. And then, after Mr. Trump’s remarks came to light, one of his prominent supporters – a preacher – used that very idea to excuse him. He said, “Oh, nobody’s perfect, so we shouldn’t judge him too harshly.” That’s true. But that can never be an excuse for terrible behavior.

We do not say that nobody is perfect and just wallow in our wrong-doing. We do not dwell in the basement of our own sinfulness and think that is where we must remain. We seek transformation. We work for change. We seek to transcend and transform the human condition.

So, first, we recognize the theological nature of our problem. Second, when we face the problem of sexism and sexual assault we claim the things we are doing right.

For fifteen or sixteen years now, we at Westmoreland have offered “Our Whole Lives” as a class for our teenagers. “Our Whole Lives” – OWL – is a brilliant faith-based human sexuality curriculum to help teenagers make responsible decisions about

relationships and about their sexual health and about their sexual behavior. It's absolutely one of the best things that we do. How many of you have taken part in OWL as either a leader or a participant...? So there are a lot of you who have a great opportunity. The first time I took the OWL training and then worked as a leader, Amy and I had been married for 10 years, we had two kids. I knew how sex worked. What I didn't know – and what I didn't know that I didn't know – was how beautiful it was to talk about it out loud and honestly in church. Sign up!

Which brings me to my third point. It seems so very simple. (And I can't wait to hear the reasons you have to say, "No" to this when you shake my hand at the door. None of which are acceptable.) Every Sunday, our beautiful, talented, very high energy, creative, lovely children go out to Church School. They sing songs or they play games or they read bible stories. But really, what they are doing is learning about relationship. Learning how to love God and how to love each other. And we have some fantastic adults who volunteer as church school leaders. (How many of you are volunteering this year on the church school schedule...?). Thank you for those who are doing that.

We need more church school leaders. But here is what I'm going to say: We need more *men* as church school leaders. We need *more men* as church school leaders. One of the tragedies of those million tweets is how many sexual assaults happen to girls who are 10, 11, 12. Men, we need to provide an alternative narrative. We need to make sure that the little boys and the little girls in this congregation see men acting silly and singing songs and crawling around on the floor – if they can. And providing safe caring, kind, supportive, loving places of safety, and grace and support.

“Oh, I can’t do that,” you’re thinking. I don’t buy it, because anybody can read from a book and draw pictures. You may not be the perfect church school leader, but that’s OK. Because we’re not looking for perfect. What we’re looking for is the presence of compassion and kindness and gentleness.

I can’t fix Donald Trump. I can’t undo the damage done to millions of girls and women, but we together can present an alternative to the boys and girls in this place. We can show them men who are kind and respectful and caring and good. And not only can we do that, we must do that. The little boys and little girls of this congregation need you, my male friends, as role models.

In the beginning God created humanity. In God’s image, male and female, God created them. God looked out on this creation, the story says to us, and God said, “It is very good.” Let us make it so. Amen.

I am indebted to other preaching colleagues whose sermons on this topic on October 9 shaped my words on October 23 – The Rev. John MacIver Gage at the United Christian Church of Austin Texas, the Rev. Ken White at College Street Congregational United Church of Christ in Burlington, Vermont; and the Rev. Shannon J. Kershner of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago – as well as to the tweets of Rachel Held Evans. The internet makes the “great cloud of witnesses” very present. Deo Gratias.