



## **UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2018**

### **Honorable Mention**

**"I Believe You – Speaking, Reclaiming, Listening"**

**By Crystal Zerfoss**

*This sermon consists of three homilies, written and preached by  
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## I Believe You – Speaking, Reclaiming, Listening

### Speaking

I was hurt and ashamed. I had to keep it secret. What would I say, anyway? The attention the upper classman poured on me at the party was flattering. I was asking for it. Right?

But I had begged him to stop, to get off of me. I cried and told him he was hurting me. And, pleaded, “Please! I can’t get pregnant!” He didn’t stop, until he took what he wanted. And then he left.

Days later I gathered the nerve to call my dear friend, also in her first semester of college, far away. Her reaction was shattering.

“I’ve lost all respect for you,” are her only words I remember. I took this as evidence that it was my fault; that I should keep my mouth shut. She was the survivor of incest and sexual violence, and believing I was immune to violation was a source of hope for her.

Her painful response sealed my silence. I closed my mouth and swallowed every ounce of what happened to me. The violation. The shame. The self-blame. The isolation.

I would not speak of it again for many years, and it took a long time to call it what it was.

Rape.

Long before it happened, I was set up to be ashamed and to keep it secret. I had been navigating white, cis-gender, female identity my entire life:

Look cute. Don’t be fat, or too skinny. You’re too tall, and that’s not feminine. Better not be too butch. Be sexy, but not too sexy. Fit in. Don’t be too emotional. Don’t be too domineering. Don’t make mistakes. Don’t rock the boat or make people uncomfortable. Be nice.

I absorbed all of that, even as the daughter of a feminist leader with a childhood immersed in songs and slogans of female liberation. By the time I was raped, I was primed to internalize the shame.

My close friend was primed to blame me and be disappointed.

The young man who raped me was primed to continue in life with no repercussions, as if I was his to take.

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The rape wasn’t the first, nor the last, time I was sexually manipulated or harassed by boys and men.

Just two years ago a high school classmate grabbed my behind at a reunion. All I could think to do in the moment was tell him he was a jerk who hadn't changed in 30 years. It was a disempowered response to yet another moment of feeling diminished, demeaned, dehumanized.

His behavior and my response are deeply patterned within our culture of patriarchy and white supremacy. I have no confidence that he would see the harm he has done. His whole life has reinforced his privilege. What power do I have to hold him accountable?

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More women are speaking about our experiences, and the halls of power are showing cracks. As a society, we are only beginning to reckon with how endemic sexual harassment and violence are.

Over and over I have heard men that I care about say they are — for the first time — learning that every woman they know has been harmed to some degree by sexual harassment, violence, or its threat.

And no woman I know is surprised by this flood of stories. We understand the courage it takes to tell them. We know what we risk by speaking up. It is the water we navigate every day.

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The disbelief, denial and shock among men is much like the response that those of us who are white have in trying to get our minds around how pervasive racism is and how deep our patterns of dominance are.

We struggle to listen to how racism and our culture of white supremacy lowers the life expectancy of Indigenous, black and brown people, puts all people of color at greater risk of arrest, incarceration, police violence.

We don't like to hear that it is a constant psychic, emotional drain, having to navigate white peoples' ignorance and bigotry. We have great difficulty seeing how this culture advantages our whiteness materially, psychologically, institutionally.

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Denial, guilt and shame only function to keep things as they are.

On the other hand, change requires us to listen, let go of certainty, withstand discomfort, and commit to the daily work of disrupting oppressive systems.

This is a time of reckoning.

Gloria Steinem said, “God may be in the details, but the goddess is in the questions. Once we begin to ask them, there’s no turning back.”

What DO I want?

I want my daughter to be safe, always.

I want every girl, woman, person to be free of sexual violence and the threat of it.

I want the men in my life, the men here today, to respect the full humanity of the girls and women in their lives.

And even more:

I want us all to see that rape or any sexual violation is a tool used to reinforce misogyny. But so is lower pay for women, and the glass ceiling, lack of childcare and family leave, the separation of children from their incarcerated mothers, the legislative and financial control over women’s rights to our own bodies and reproductive lives.

I want men to understand that rampant pornography, sexualizing girls, using our bodies as marketing tools, and “locker room talk” all contribute to our oppression.

I want men, especially white men, to know what you surrender of your own humanity when perpetuating a system that values your opinions, access, profit above all others.

I want men to listen to our stories, to believe us, to stay present in this discomfort, and to share the reigns.

As more of us speak up, we not only build confidence, we shed light on the patterns of oppression that must change. We can see that the oppressions that separate us – misogyny, racism, heterosexism, cis-genderism, classism — are all rooted in the living legacies and culture of colonialism, white supremacy and patriarchy.

Anita Hill said, “We’ve got to understand that all disenfranchised people have something in common...The pursuit of justice really is about equality for everyone.”

I am growing more confident to tell my story. My voice is stronger, and I am building my capacity to be in solidarity with all who work for justice.

Beloved sisters, I am with you.

Let us keep speaking, knowing our power, and creating the world we dream.

I believe you.

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## **Reclaiming**

I am a woman.  
When I was 12 years old, I was a girl.  
When I was 7, I was a girl.  
I am now an adult. Have been for many years.

I am a woman.  
I am not a girl. I am not a chick. I am not a babe. I am not your baby.  
Unless I tell you that I am these things, do not call me them.  
Call me by my name.

I am a woman.  
I am not weak or inferior or less than or subservient to.  
I'm not too delicate or just not man enough or someone who doesn't have the balls to do something.

I am strong.  
I am capable.  
I am competent.  
I am intelligent.  
I am equal.  
I am a leader.  
I am feminine.  
I am also masculine.  
I do not need the confines of the archaic gender binary to define me.

I have no need to man up, (whatever that ridiculous notion of masculinity even means.)  
I do not need certain genitalia to accomplish complex and demanding tasks.  
I do not need you to repeat what I just said so others will actually listen to it.

I am not a nasty woman because I have an opinion.  
I am not a nasty woman because you do not like me.  
I am not bossy because I am assertive.  
I am not a nag because I have standards.  
I am not having that time of the month because you disagree with my leadership.  
I am not on the rag because I have emotions.

I am a woman.  
I have a voice.  
What I have to say is valid.  
What I tell you about my experience is true.

When I speak, I deserve to be heard.  
When I speak, I deserve to be believed.  
When I speak, I tell the truth, and

I will not be silenced anymore.

I do not consent to your catcalling, to your degrading comments on my clothes, my hair, my legs, my butt, my make-up, my cleavage, my smile.  
I smile when I feel like smiling.

I do not consent to your “accidental” brushing up against my breasts on the train, to your hand on my thigh in a meeting, to your smelling my hair or patting my rear end.

I decide who touches my body, and how, and when.  
My body is my own.

I am not a bitch because I reject your unwanted advances.  
I’m not a slut because I choose to engage in sexual relations with someone other than you.  
I am not a whore because I dress a certain way or dance a certain way.  
I am not an object of conquest.

I am not obligated to have sex with you because you bought me dinner or flowers or drove me home or because you are aroused or because we’ve had sex before or because we’re married.

My body is my own.

No means No.  
If I said Yes before and now say No, you stop.  
If I said Yes to a point, then changed my mind and said No, you stop.  
If I said Yes to certain things and you want more, but I say No, you stop.

I decide what to do with my body.  
My body is my own.

I am a sexual being.  
I have natural sexual desire that fluctuates with my hormones.  
My decision to engage intimately in particular ways or to refrain from certain acts is my decision, not yours.

I choose with whom and when and how I want to engage in sexual activity.  
I get consent from my partner and expect my partner to get my consent as well.  
Drugging me never equals my consent.

I have a voice.  
I will not be silenced.  
I will speak my truth.  
Verbally, in sign language, in writing, through movement – I will speak my truth.

I will speak for those who cannot or will not or who choose not to speak.

I will speak so others know they are not alone.  
I will speak so abusers and rapists and harassers and those who degrade women will know their actions are wrong.  
I will speak to help break the cycle of power and control in domestic violence.  
I will speak to change our culture of misogyny, oppression, and patriarchy.

I will speak because I choose to speak.

I am a woman.  
I am a survivor.  
I've been belittled, degraded, catcalled, touched without my permission, violated, and, when I shared my story, disbelieved.

I know what I've experienced.  
I get to decide when, if, and how I disclose my story.  
I am under no obligation to revisit, recount, or prove the harassment and violence I've experienced.  
My story is real.  
My truth is to be believed.

I am a woman.  
I have a voice.  
My body is my own.

I'm reclaiming my time.  
I'm reclaiming my voice.  
I'm reclaiming my body.  
I'm reclaiming my agency.

I am a woman.  
And,

I believe you.

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## Listening

It was a typical weekday morning in our home: my husband was making coffee, I was cleaning my breakfast dishes, the cats were staking out their spots for a morning nap. Then my husband said: “You know this MeToo thing? Do you have a story like that?”

I stopped what I was doing and turned to look into his face. I saw openness and curiosity, tinged with fear, as if he was afraid of what he might hear. I paused, took a deep breath, and said, “Yes, I do.”

I told him the story about something that happened when I was 15, that I haven’t thought about for years.

As I told my story, I watched the emotions cross his face: surprise, shock, sadness, anger.

When I finished, he shook his head and said, “I’m sorry. I’m just so sorry.”

In that moment after my husband asked his question, when I took a deep breath, I realized how vulnerable I felt. I was nervous about telling my story to a loving man I’ve been in relationship with for 37 years. Women who share their stories take an incredible risk, knowing that the response may well be blaming, shaming, denial, minimizing, silencing. In this moment, millions of women are joining together to speaking up anyway, saying “Me Too. Enough.”

I want to acknowledge that I am speaking in gender binary terms—men and women. There are men who are victims of harassment and violence, especially gay, bisexual and gender non-conforming men. There are women who are perpetrators of violence. Each of us has the ability to misuse power. I am saying “men and women” because I want to speak of misogyny and patriarchy, which affects us all in many ways; overwhelmingly in terms of the gender-based violence of men against women.

Choosing whether to tell our stories is one thing; listening is another. Native elder and human rights attorney James (Sa’k’ej) Youngblood Henderson said, “To truly listen is to risk being changed forever.” It is a risk to speak. It is also a risk to deeply listen. This is why some men who have harassed or abused cannot listen to their accusers, let alone acknowledge the impact of their actions. It would challenge their view of themselves and the world. It would require that they ask some difficult questions about who they are and how they have been. They will deny and discredit rather than experience one bit of discomfort.

So, we must listen; first, to ourselves. Men must listen to the voice of patriarchy within that says stepping back to make room for women is emasculating; the voice that says that being powerful means power over rather than power with; the voice that says that being held accountable is being victimized.



Women must listen to the voice of patriarchy within that says that we are responsible for men's behavior; the voice that says our bodies do not belong to us; the voice that says we are not worthy of being seen or heard.

There is another deeper, truer voice within each of us.

We must listen to women. We know that a majority of incidents of sexual harassment and assault are not reported, and that most reports are found to be true. Estimates are that 93% or more of allegations are found to be credible. 93%. The debate about whether allegations are true is just another way to discredit women and discount our reality.

My sisters, we must listen to each other. It is the patriarchy that makes us believe that we have to choose between supporting a sister and having a job. It is the patriarchy that makes us believe that our best option is to say, "Yes, he's a jerk, but he's our jerk," as a sister is sacrificed. Let's dismantle patriarchy, not each other.

Despite what some say, this is not a women's issue. Violence against women by men is intrinsically a men's issue. We must change how we raise boys and what we expect of men. And, change means loss. For men, it may mean loss of power as you know it, it may mean loss of the status quo and comfort, it may mean loss of what you believe it means to be a man. What would change if, rather than asking how many girls and women are abused by men, if we were to ask instead why men abuse the women and girls, the boys and men that they say they love?

The theme for this month is God and for an image, we are using Michelangelo's painting from the Sistine Chapel. Last Sunday, (*speaker*) spoke about that inch of space between the index fingers of the two figures in the painting, suggesting that God is in that space. I believe that God is also in the space between each of us. It is in that space where we practice the spiritual discipline of listening, where we risk being vulnerable to speak and to listen, and where we do sacred work.

When we listen deeply, we can re-humanize, offering to each other a mirror which reflects back to us the beauty and worthiness of our being once again. That is what I experienced in my kitchen one morning just a few weeks ago.

Kendall Gibbons said,

There comes a time——when the truth at last makes us free,  
and in that moment is the salvation of the world.

This can be that moment when the truth is spoken and heard, and in its hearing, may we find our freedom.

I pray to the Goddess, Gaia, Kuan Yin, God of All Names, oh I pray, may it be so. Amen.