

John Sampson  
"Whose Image?"  
Text: Matthew 22:15 - 22  
Preached at KVCC  
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Do you remember that song by Simon and Garfunkel called "The Sound of Silence"?

It has one of those haunting verses in it that has never left me since the first time I heard it. The lyrics go: "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls."

What these words suggest is that at the time the song was written those who spoke truth to power weren't to be found in old books,

and within the walls of a church like this, but out there, out in the world, out in the midst of our ordinary lives.

But these words by Simon and Garfunkel are already dated, aren't they?

Today power is challenged not in mass transit stations, but on Facebook walls, and Twitter feeds, in Snapchat videos, and through Instagram.

I have a question. Who here uses Twitter?

Like many of you I don't, because I've found it redundant, and frankly an app that delivers more noise into my life, which is already overflowing with the noise of too many conversations that just don't have enough depth and value for me.

But in the last week I've been accessing Twitter to be part of a conversation that is truly prophetic in that it calls into question the power centers of our day-to-day lives, and the assumptions many of us carry in the deepest reaches of our beings about how we act towards each other. It is a conversation that is in many ways not new at all, but nonetheless shocking in its scope and breadth.

It is a conversation that goes by the hashtag metoo.

If you haven't been on Twitter I urge you to access this hashtag and read through some of the literally millions of posts from women, and some men, that have cataloged episodes of sexual harassment and abuse that women, of all ages, and all walks of life, and from all nations, endure on a daily basis from men who they know, and men who are strangers. It is a conversation that started in response to the actions of the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, but has quickly expanded in scope to other industries, and communities.

Listen to some of these words of the prophets, written not on the subway walls, but in 140 character tweets:

It's heartbreaking to see how many girls have been a victim of rape Unfortunately my bestfriend & I have fallen victim to it  
#MeToo

I pray that if I ever have a daughter, she never experiences the things I have #MeToo

#MeToo Way too many times. Early I learnt that it is a man's world. Men live while women survive... Better laws are needed.

The victim has everything to lose by speaking up. The abuser has everything to gain by the story remaining secret. #MeToo

From what women are sharing on Twitter the inhumanity that the #metoo conversation is unearthing is not a story of somewhere else, or of a different time. It is a story that is sitting right here in this church, this morning. It is a story that is about women and men; it is a story about you and me; it is a story about all of us.

It is a story that asks us who we belong to, who has rights over us, and if we can have sovereignty over our own bodies, and our minds, and our futures. For many of the women who have contributed their stories to the #metoo, the answer is that at certain times, and perhaps for their entire lives, someone else has forcefully taken the opportunity to exert power over their bodies, and hearts and lives.

And this is the constellation of questions that sits at the foundation of Jesus' parable of the coin, which we heard earlier. And although Jesus is seemingly talking about coins, and money, and resources he is really talking about lives, our lives.

Caesar gets to demand the coin that Jesus shows the Pharisees in his story because his image is stamped upon it. His image acts as a brand and is the proof of his ownership, and his power. But Imperial power didn't stop with coins. All of the subjects of the Roman Empire were politically, militarily, religiously and psychically branded with the power of Rome, and the Emperor. This led to situations where colonized people gave up the worship of their gods in favor of Roman gods, or began to dress differently under Roman rule, or took on a new language and culture that was imported from Italy. The Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, is a euphemism for a process that was anything but peaceful, and which erased the uniqueness and humanity of the colonized in favor of the officially sanctioned image of the emperor.

Do you not hear the echo of this experience in the tweets of the women who posted their stories in the #metoo? Have these women

not been subjected to the power of a male image, and male desire?  
Have the victims not had their agency and sovereignty erased by  
male violence which uses sexuality as its tool and weapon? Have  
not some of these women had their inner image of themselves  
corroded and overlaid with the image of their attacker?

Whose image?

At the moment of harassment and sexual violence it is the male  
attacker who would respond: My image!

But in this moment of infinite darkness Jesus reminds us that there  
is a limit to the power that inhumanity, violence and intimidation  
ultimately have over our lives.

For there is an image of Caesar, certainly.

But there is also an image of God, and that is the image in which we are all made. Hear the words of the creation story that opens our Bible:

“Humankind was created as God’s reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.”

What our spiritual ancestors are telling us is that we are all reflections of the image not of Caesar, or of our attackers, but of the Divine. We are sacred and because of that our lives, and our humanity, have ultimate value. We do not belong to Caesar, to those who would have abusive dominion over us. We belong to God. And thus, for a man to attack and violate a woman is to attack and violate God herself.

Whose image?



At the moment of creation, and in all of our deepest beings God responds: My image!

Unfortunately, #metoo has put front and center the fact that these types of sexual violations are not an aberration, but a norm experienced by all kinds of women.

Do you remember a number of weeks ago we heard a story where Jesus said that the first step in the process of forgiveness is that the person who has been harmed or wronged should approach the one who sinned and tell them what they have done?

#metoo is this first step, not that it is the first time that women have told their stories of harassment and abuse. It is the first step enacted yet again, in a much more public and expansive forum. It is the moment when the victim tells the truth of their experience, and it asks the perpetrator not to defend themselves, not to deflect

responsibility, but to simply listen and hear what is being shared. It is a moment of humility where the one who had the power over another now let's that power drop, and makes themselves vulnerable to the words of the one who was wronged.

This is a question for the men in this room, and all across our nation, and our world. Have we, individually and collectively, allowed ourselves to be vulnerable to the prophetic truth that is being expressed on Twitter, and in the news, regarding the sexual harassment and violence committed against women? Have we been willing to lay down our privilege and open ourselves to the raw experience contained in the millions of 140 character Tweets? And have we been able to honestly examine our hearts and memories and take responsibility for whatever our role has been in this story that so many women are sharing? Here are what some men have posted on #IHave, which is another Twitter forum created in response to #metoo:

#IHave absolutely. I was raised by an amazing strong woman and I still have. There was never intent to but I look back and my heart sinks.

#Ihave crossed the line. I have taken advantage of trust. I have chalked it up to drugs. I have laughed it off. #Iwill never do it again.

Perhaps this is what the beginning of repentance looks like in an Internet focused world. It is hard; it is courageous; it demands humility and openness; it requires a commitment to go as far as we can in our honesty and then, perhaps, to go even further. But I also wonder if it can allow those who perpetrate crimes to admit guilt, without really taking responsibility for their actions. Hiding behind Twitter personas, confessing not directly to the victim, but to a generic Twitter-verse, sharing a version of a truth that cannot be

longer than 140 characters. Do these limitations actually allow for the type of life altering redemption that Jesus invites all of to offer to each other, and receive from each other? Can an online app really restore the sacred image of those who have been violated?

I am skeptical that redemption can be fully contained within the online world, but it obviously can be facilitated there. There is no doubt that the #metoo conversation is allowing women to tell the truth, in a virtual community, and to feel seen and supported. There is no doubt that the #metoo tweets have allowed all of us to gain a better sense of the magnitude of the issue. There is no doubt that these 140 character stories have changed the national conversation. But can it actually affect a change of heart and meaningful reconciliation?

I share a final tweet with you. It is a tweet that is hopeful, and points to what Jesus asks of us in his ministry of repentance.

A boy just apologized for the way he treated me freshman year because of the #MeToo movement I am crying I am so happy

Tweets may not do the hard work of reconciliation, but they are certainly able to set the stage for it. The reason the boy who harassed the woman approached her was because of the #metoo conversation, but he went further. He actually connected with his victim and apologized for his actions. Meaningful change for this woman happened offline, and in person with the perpetrator taking responsibility for his actions. In that moment she could be seen according to her God-given image, and not in the image of her attacker that had been superimposed over her during her attack.

In that moment if you asked the woman, whose image?

She would have replied, "My image!" And her image is the image  
God gave her, as a blessed child of the Divine.

AMEN.