

The ABC of a Feminist Hermeneutics
Sermon during Domestic Violence Awareness Month
Dr. Susanne Scholz
Professor of Old Testament
Perkins School of Theology/SMU
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Texts: Genesis 34:2-3; Psalm 23

This is Domestic Awareness Month in the USA. It is its thirtieth anniversary because the idea to bring awareness to domestic violence was at its height in the 1980s. Feminists decided then to bring attention to this grave social problem that reaches into the most private areas in our lives. When someone you love abuses you—and the abuse ranges from emotional to psychological to financial to sexual and other physical forms of violence—it is very difficult to speak about it, no less to untangle yourself from the beloved person. Since the point of such violence is always power and control, the—hopefully—victim survivor experiences a systematic pattern of intimidation, harassment, and violation. Most people find it very difficult to break free.

Here is how the *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence* defines domestic violence:

Domestic violence is the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another. It includes physical violence, sexual violence, threats, and emotional/psychological abuse. The frequency and severity of domestic violence varies dramatically.¹

The statistics on domestic violence in the United States are staggering²:

- On a typical day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide.
- In the United States, an average of 20 people are physically abused by intimate partners every minute. This equates to more than 10 million abuse victims annually.

- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been physically abused by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have been severely physically abused by an intimate partner.

And the list goes on and on.

So the question is: Why is there so much violent behavior among people who presumably love each other?

One of the reasons has to do with our messed up notions of love. It is very difficult for most of us to recognize that love has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with abuse, control, intimidation, harassment, and violence. We see love when there is violence. We see love when there is abuse. We see love when there is intimidation. We see love when there is control, harassment, and neglect. We love when there is sexual abuse, rape, and even murder.

And the reason for our confusion is not only because of “us” as individuals. As I always like to say: it has to do with our “social locations” and our cultures, histories, traditions, and yes, our religious notions about love. Just think of the countless filmic representations that mix love with violence. The more violence, the kinkier the love. The genre of the disaster movie communicates this messed up depiction of love in the currently perhaps most successful way.

It is here that a feminist hermeneutics needs to counteract with our ABC. I call it the ABC of a feminist hermeneutics. In our case, let’s specify it as Christian because we are Christians in this church house. It is the ABC of a Christian feminist hermeneutics.

A as in Anger. The feminist ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, who was a powerhouse of a professor, mentor, and thinker in Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary in NYC during the last quarter of the twentieth century, talks about the power of anger in the work of love.³ She explains definitively that no feminist Christian can live and work for God’s justice on

this green earth without the power of anger. She means by anger a deep seated feeling that we feel when something is just pure wrong. The feeling of anger is a signal that we have to recognize that all is not well in our world, in our relations with the world, people, other persons, including animals, of course. Therefore, in Bev's view, "anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring." As such, "anger is—and it always is—a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed. Extreme and intense anger signals a deep reaction to the action upon us or toward others to whom we are related." "Anger signals something amiss in relationship." "It is a critical first step in understanding the power of anger in the work of love. Where anger rises, there the energy to act is present. In anger, one's body-self is engaged. To be sure, anger—no more than any other set of feelings—does not lead automatically to wise or humane action...." But when we feel the power of anger in our bodies, we need to recognize it as "a signal that change is called for, that transformation in relation is required." Bev urges us not to evade our feelings and she observes that in the churches evasion of feeling is widespread and anger is definitely not accepted. But that doesn't mean it goes away. It comes out in devastating forms, which include pretensions of boredom, ennui, low energy, passive-aggressive behavior, or moralistic self-righteousness and blaming. Let the congregation say: yes, yes yes.

So "A as in anger" starts us off as Christian feminists in our feminist hermeneutics on domestic violence. It gets us to the radical acts of love that God calls us to with which we express our human solidarity and bring mutual relationships to life. It gives us the power to confront those forces, situations, people preventing the power of human personal and communal becoming; the power to expose that which denies human well-being, community, and human solidarity in the world. It gives us the power to break through the "lies, secrets, and silences"

and to crush “prevailing distortions and manipulations in relationship.”⁴ It gives us the power to demand and to do justice in the world, to right wrong relationships in the world so that we live by radical mutuality and reciprocity. Let the congregation say: Amen.

Then there is **B as in Bible**, and I realize I have to abbreviate my remarks to stay in my allotted time frame. For Protestant Christians, the “B as in Bible” has to do with sola scriptura etcetera etcetera etcetera... After all, if the Bible tells us anything it is how our readings reflect our assumptions, biases, beliefs, and convictions when we read the Bible. This is certainly true for Genesis 34:2-3. Truth be told, it’s very difficult for me to be brief at this point. After all, I wrote a whole book on this particular biblical chapter! In a nutshell, anger is actually how my work with Dinah’s story began: the commentaries just didn’t make any sense. Perhaps you didn’t hear it when we just listened to the two verses, but let me spell it out for you just a little bit and please go to the library and read the whole book.

וַיֵּרָא אֶתְהָ שָׁכֶם בֶּן־חַמּוֹר הַחִוִּי נָשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ ^{WTT} **Genesis 34:2**
 וַיִּקַּח אֶתְהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶהָ:
 וַחֲדָבֶק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַת־יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּאָהֵב ^{WTT} **Genesis 34:3**
 אֶת־הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל־לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ:

How to translate these verses, that’s the question. Here are two options. Let’s stick it out with the King James Version:

^{KJV} Gen. 34:2 And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her.

^{KJV} Gen. 34:3 And his soul clave unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the damsel, and spake kindly unto the damsel.

Please go and read my detailed exegesis in *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34*, pages 136-142.⁵ Here I will only say this: If you did not notice immediately that in verse 2 sexual violence, rape, does not make sense with the love in verse 3, then you are part of the great

majority of biblical commentators. Most of them argue that love overcomes rape in verses 2-3.

The end.

I will give you two quotes as a teaser, a depressing teaser for sure, to illustrate the depth of our confusion over the relationship between violence and love.

Let's start with a nineteenth-century German Christian commentator, Franz Delitzsch. He characterized what Shechem did to Dinah as an expression of love and thus implies that love erases rape. He writes: "The young seducer only loved her whom he had seduced the more, soothed her with pleasant prospects of the future, and actually entreated his father to take him the damsel for a wife... Shechem really loved Dinah."⁶ He sees no contradiction when he states that "after the violent act follows love for the weakened," that is, for Dinah.

The other commentators wrote more recently on Genesis 34 and one of them even taught at Perkins and the other one at TCU; almost "neighbors" in other words. They are Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn and their reading really stirred my "A as in anger" when I read it back in the day....

This is what they say about Shechem and Dinah in verses 2-3. They argue that "the narrator [of Genesis 34] tips the balance in Shechem's favor.... If sympathy is being accumulated, it seems to us to be sympathy for Shechem."⁷ Thus they maintain: It would have been in Dinah's "best interest within the narrow limits of this society...to marry Shechem, the man who loves her and takes delight in her." Fewell and Gunn even go so far to claim that theirs is a feminist reading because they do not identify Dinah as "a helpless girl to be rescued" but as "a young woman who could have made her own choices—limited though they might have been—had she been asked." They also acknowledge that "to advocate a woman's marrying her rapist might itself seem to be dangerous and androcentric advocacy," and they argue that "the

story world” offers no “other liberating alternatives.” Wow. This is truly a literary-historical argument gone awry, isn’t it?! Talk about jumping into your hermeneutical box and staying in it.

So like good-old Delitzsch, Fewell and Gunn also privilege verse 3 over verse 2.

Although much could be said for translating verse 3 in a very different way, I propose that verse 2 shape the exegetical-grammatical meaning so that verses 2b-3 read like this:

2b. And he took her,
 And he laid her,
 And he raped her
 3. And he stayed physically close to the young woman,
 And he lusted after the young woman,
 And he attempted to calm down the young woman.

In short, love does not follow rape. Let’s interpret verse 3 for what it is after the rape of verse 2. Shechem does not love Dinah, but he tries to cover up, to calm down the woman whom he raped. The intricacies of the exegetical argument are in my book. But it is obvious that as feminist Christians, we really have to learn Hebrew and Greek and the exegetical tools of the trade so that we have the power to oppose harmful exegetical meanings of the Bible.

And finally and very briefly, there is **C as in Community**. For feminist theologians, community comes in the form of FACE, a feminist student organization at Perkins, that established itself at Perkins last year. We need community, yes, feminist community, especially when it stands on the shoulders of our many feminist, womanist, and mujerista foremothers, such as Bev Harrison and all the others. We practice community with intersectional awareness. Of course, we also recognize community, feminist or not, is not always easy. Often our lives take over and we get too busy to take our own organizations and groups seriously. This is a pity. But when we do come back and are part of the C of the ABC of a feminist hermeneutics, we know we missed the C in our feminist hermeneutics. We also know that our ultimate community is with God, as precarious and difficult it is to make this statement in our post-Holocaust, Trumpian

world. So let us read together in call and response and in Hebrew (transliteration provided) an important part of Psalm 23 that ends with *kî ‘attah ‘îmadî*. This will be our mantra for our C so that we remember God is with us, always, and especially when we wonder where God is. [*Read call and listen to response.*]

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| God is my shepherd, | יְהוָה רֹעִי | <i>ha-shem ro'î</i> |
| I shall not want. | לֹא אֶחְסַר: | <i>lo aḥsar.</i> |
| I fear no harm, | לֹא-אִירָא רָע | <i>lo ‘îra’ ra’</i> |
| For You are with me. | כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי | <i>kî ‘attah ‘îmadî</i> |

Amen.

¹ For the definition, visit <https://ncadv.org/learn-more> [accessed October 5, 2017].

² For these and additional statistics, visit <https://ncadv.org/learn-more/statistics> [accessed October 5, 2017].

³ Beverly W. Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1981): 41-57.

⁴ Harrison, “The Power of Anger,” 52.

⁵ Susanne Scholz, *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 129-169.

⁶ See Franz Delitzsch quoted in Scholz, *Rape Plots*, 58-59.

⁷ See the discussion in Scholz, *Rape Plots*, 121-125.