Tamar Speaks!

Safe Church Retreat for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

More than 30 survivors attended this retreat held at Black Rock Retreat Center on April 5, 2014. It was a powerful and moving day, bringing together survivors in various stages of healing – some at the beginning of the journey, some in the messy middle, and others who have moved into thriving, with more than few engaged in advocacy and activism to end abuse.

As we read and reflected on the story of Tamar (2 Samuel 13) raped by her brother with the help of an uncle and left to carry the shame that rightfully belonged to her abuser, we learned that the name of Tamar means “date palm” in Hebrew, a unique sweet flower of the desert. The abuse took away her essential self, her very name, and she lost all hope of marriage, family and a life of her own. As survivors looked up the meanings of their own names on their smart-phones, some gasps were audible in the room as people discovered how their authentic selves had been twisted by the abuse into something nearly the opposite of their names. “Hope” had turned into “Despair” and “Purity” had turned into “I am Dirty!”

One of our activities was to create a “Wailing Wall” to make visible wounds that are often unrecognized by others. Since we are in the season of Lent, we decided to structure the Wall to express the three Holy days as aspects of our experiences: Friday: The Trauma (Crucifixion); Saturday: The Descent (Mourning what was taken) and Sunday: Easter/Resurrection (The Rising, Redemption).

On scraps of red paper, survivors wrote words to symbolize the trauma of the sexual violence they suffered. This section of the Wall was the largest. On yellow shards of paper, we wrote about what was taken from us by the abuse; and on larger pieces of purple paper, survivors wrote what resurrection “looks like” and the wisdom survivors carry with them when they rise and claim their “true names”.

Following is a transcription of some of the Wall to illustrate what childhood sexual abuse is, what is taken from those who experience it, and what it means to “rise” and embody resurrection.

We also include a sampling of questions survivors said they wanted to ask God, the church, or their pastors. We give them to the churches because these are questions that must be addressed by our faith communities. If we in the church cannot respond, who will?
We encourage churches to engage congregants in dialogue around these expressions of pain, loss and hope. You may want to recreate this “wall” in your church, asking congregants to copy over some of the transcribed text below and allowing space for loved ones of survivors to add their own expressions. You may decide to hold discussion circles with congregants, using this article as a starting point to help people “hear” the voice of Tamar echoed by survivors living in our midst today.

Good Friday – The trauma. The crucifixion.

The questions: What words or symbols describe what happened to you? What did you experience during the abuse? What did it teach you?

A black hole.
Martyred.
So angry!
Flawed.
I am a joke.
Silenced.
There is no refuge, no safe place for me.
Losing my virginity when I was only 8 years old.

Filled with fear.
I AM GROSS.
Don’t show me……I don’t want to see.
Damaged goods.
My childhood ended.
HELP ME. STAY AWAY. HELP ME. STAY AWAY.
Frozen.
Shame.
Disgusted. I am unclean now. I am worthless.
I am a broken reed, a crushed flower.
No more tears. I can’t cry.
I learned how to become someone else – not me.
Numb.
I don’t know how to live with, and love, someone who was my abuser.
Defective. Faulty.
I am only useful for someone else’s pleasure.
I hate myself.
I dissociate all the time – and I don’t know how to come back.
Powerless. My arms held back.
Drowning in the ocean, no shoreline in sight.
A shattered egg.
I acted out sexually
I felt an unseen hand on my face, giving me comfort.
I became invisible.
A voice tenderly speaking My Beloved Daughter.
Orphaned.
Objectified.
Vulnerable.
Humiliation.
Threats to kill my pet. I was more worried about my turtle than me.
Defiled.
Why me? Why me?
Secrets. Don’t tell anyone!
I hate us! He is NOT going to win.
Fatherless.
Incest. There it is.
Betrayal.
I still find myself in denial, like I don’t belong in a survivor’s circle.
I turned to alcohol to numb myself.
Not good enough.
No attachment or bond to my parents.
No one sees me, no one cares, no one hears me, no one helps …or if they do and still don’t help that is even worse.

Saturday: The Decent into Hell. The Tomb. Mourning.
The questions: What was taken from you? From your view or capacity to be with others? To experience God in a healing way?

My identity as a female.
Freedom.
Ability to see any worth in myself.
My music.
I lost my religion.
Desire to have children and a family.
Ability to depend on others without feeling like a burden.
I lost God.

Ability to be close with my children.
I need to forgive God for the times he let me down.
My sexuality.
My faith.
Marriage.
I lost myself. I lost my identity.
My voice.
My ability to choose
My childhood memories.
My ability to love and to be loved.
My innocence was stolen.
My spirit was crushed, denied space, light and water in which to grow.
Self-respect.
I lost my health.
I lost my capacity to feel emotions.
My ability to fight back.
I lost any connection to my own body.
I lost my home and my family.
My belief that I can face “reality”.
My sense of safety, security.
My capacity to trust, to be intimate.
My ability to be a good parent.
I lost my trust of men in authority.
The ability to stay in the “present”.
I lost hope.
My ability to form healthy relationships.
My relationship with my parents.
Being “normal”.
I lost my capacity to pursue a career, to take care of myself financially.
My ability to receive comfort – and to give it.
Any sense of who God is.
I lost my trust in the goodness of people.


The questions: What does redemption or resurrection look like for you? What is your real “name” and what does it mean?

Peace. To love myself, and be in a closer relationship with God.
My name means strong and free. Freedom’s song.
Beloved. Be-loving.
Intimacy in a marriage. To feel loved, to be loved, to be comfortable in being “me”.
Trust. Identity. Faith. Freedom...
To walk with others in a supportive system.
Peace/Self/God/God. To be a listener.
To build a home, not a fortress.
Authentic joy. To feel treasured by God.

My name comes from “Christo”, “Christ” (Greek)
Redemption = Freedom = saved. Identified as a person.
Embracing, rather than pushing people away.
My name means Peace. Ruler. Redemption means acceptance.

My name means Pure. Redemption means Peace in order to love and be in a closer relationship with God.
To be called Beloved. Darling. Dear One. With a song in the night.
My name means God will Protect. Redemption means believing it.


My name means “Great happiness, Noble”. I want to be pure. I will be happy. I will have a voice. I will be a born again virgin.

This stone is traded in for a new cornerstone. A new foundation. Jesus Christ risen indeed.

Questions Survivors want to ask the Church/Pastors:
What are you so afraid of?
Why are you so reluctant to talk about child sexual abuse? To acknowledge the survivors/victims in the congregation?
Are you really “ready” for us (survivors)?
Can you really handle me?
Do you have any idea how low my self-esteem/self-worth is because of the abuse?
How do we create spaces of trust and also have vigilance to protect children?
How do we embrace offenders?
How are you going to help us (survivors)? Be specific! Will you have support groups?

Why do you have all kinds of other support groups but NONE for survivors?

What is the balance between grace and truth?

Do you know that your refusal to listen and believe the truth about abuse is even more painful than the abuse itself?

How do we create space for pastor-survivors to disclose as part of their ministry?

Why do you tell us to “forgive and move on?” Do you know how that hurts?

Why do we wear social masks more in the church than in any other place?

When you KNOW there is an offender in the church: What are you DOING about it to be sure people are protected?

Do you understand these wounds (sexual abuse) are different? Don’t say you “get it” when you clearly don’t!

Pastors: Why aren’t you getting educated and trained about sexual abuse? Do you think you can learn all you need to know in a short workshop????!!

Do you know how hurtful masculine images of “God the father” are for me? Please, use gender neutral ways to express God.

Do you understand how “parent” language (mother or father) for God is NOT appropriate for incest survivors? Find other images!

Questions for God:

I am trying so hard…why aren’t you helping me to heal?

Why didn’t you protect me?

Why did you give me parents that abused me?

Will I ever heal?