

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

In August of 2014, I started my sophomore year at Northern Illinois University. I was 19 years old. I had recently started my new job as a community advisor in the dorms, was volunteering with an organization with adults with disabilities, which I loved, and I was in the process of starting a co-ed a cappella singing group with two of my friends. I had a solid friend group, loved my classes, and was enjoying a successful start to my second year of college. I was excited to be singing in the university's choir this year too. That's where I met Dan. Honestly, I don't even remember how we began talking, but he seemed nice enough. I'd met him in choir, after all, so he seemed pretty safe. We hung out once at his house and had a great time. When he invited me back over that weekend and said he was having some people over, I figured why not? I felt like I could trust him. That weekend, I showed up and realized I was out of my comfort zone. Most of the night is a blur, but there are certain things that will always stick with me. That night, October 24th, 2015, is the night that I became part of the 1 in 4 statistic of women who experience non-consensual sex during college. 1 in 4. The next day and a half or so were a blur of questions, doctors, nurses, and emotion. I couldn't really explain or remember most of the night, and as the memories came back, I didn't want to admit what had happened anyways. I was shocked, confused, and upset. The day after I got home from the hospital, I got up and went to class like usual, pretending nothing had happened. Nobody needed to know what had happened over the weekend. I carried on with my semester, really only confiding in one close friend (He's still one of my very best friends today, and I can't imagine what I would have done without him). I was embarrassed, ashamed, and blaming myself. How could I let something so stupid

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

happen to myself? I had been raised to know better and be more careful. I never should have gone to his house that night. I never should have taken a drink from him. I never should have trusted him. I should have said “no” louder. I should have fought back. There seemed like so much that I could have done differently. I was so angry at myself for letting it happen. This entire experience was totally out of character for me. I was always the level-headed friend that wanted to take care of everyone else. How did I get myself into a situation like this? Ignoring it seemed like the only way to move on and finish the semester.

Ignoring it wasn't going well. I was maintaining A's in my classes, succeeding in my extracurriculars, but I was using them to cover up how I was really feeling. It was a mix of stress, fear, anger, and plain numbness, so in March of 2015, I finally sought the help that I needed, and I'll always be grateful for that therapist. See, I'm kind of stubborn. I absolutely LOVE helping and caring for others, but I hate admitting when I need help of my own. This therapist finally made me realize that it's totally okay to not be okay all the time. She helped me label what had been happened that night, because I still hadn't been able to say it. I had been raped. I hadn't asked for it; I had said no; it wasn't my fault. She helped me realize I needed to forgive myself and start to heal. It's an ongoing process.

Fast forward to Thanksgiving of 2015. Towards the end of the semester, I finally decided I was fed up with how he had messed up my life and then so easily walked away. With several pep talks from my therapist, I filed a police report. Unfortunately, it was too late for anything to ever come of that, and I didn't have any evidence. No one would actually believe me if I were to pursue anything. The police

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

officer said not to expect anything to happen. In early January of 2016, on my last day home for winter break, I finally told my parents what had happened that night, and thank God, they believed me. I still remember the fear that I had in telling my parents. It was a conversation my therapist and I talked through many times. I was so terrified that it would absolutely devastate them, or that they would be mad, or that I would have to dive into details of how, when, why, where, who. I didn't want them to have to go through all of the feelings that I had been going through. I didn't want to do that to them. Although I know they were upset when I told them, it wasn't at me. What hurt my mom most was knowing that I had gone through so much of it on my own. More than anything, my parents just wanted to support me through it. It shouldn't be something I was facing alone. Seems obvious now, but it sure didn't then.

I was so afraid because society puts up this horrid stigma, and I'm still hesitant to this day. I've sure come a long way about talking about it. Never in a million years would I have imagined talking about this in front of a crowd, let alone my church! There's still a small fear in me anytime I mention it that someone will blame me, think I'm overreacting, or simply "not want to hear about it right now." "This isn't the time or place." I'm always afraid of burdening others too---after all, I don't want to be a "downer", and I'm sure others have had way worse experiences.

So, in September of 2018, I took a big step. With the Kavanaugh trials overwhelming my Facebook feed, I had to say something because I needed to speak up for another woman. All of the feelings of fear, guilt, and shame instead turned into feelings of anger, anxiety, and overall just feeling fed up. I was so sick of victims

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

being blamed. I had no evidence when I was finally ready to report my rape, and I could've used a lot more people saying "I believe her." I officially "came out" on Facebook and shared my story in the form of an "I believe her" post. The responses to my post were completely overwhelming, and guess what? So many of the responses were from members of this church that are sitting here today. I literally sat at home crying reading my Facebook comments, but this time, they were tears of relief. I was SO relieved that people believed me and cared enough to respond. Even better, was that it was my church community. And it wasn't just me, SO many people were sharing their stories, and it felt like more people were believing than shaming. I didn't feel embarrassed anymore; I felt heard.

That's when I approached Pastor Adam to suggest the idea of a Break the Silence Sunday this year. I learned about Break the Silence Sunday a couple years ago. My mom (who is here with me today) met Reverend Moira Finley at a church conference meeting and noticed her pin that said "This is what a rape survivor looks like." My mom made a comment on the pin and mentioned my experience. Moira immediately gave my mom the pin to give to me, and I've been following the movement on Facebook ever since. Although I've often been too afraid to wear this pin, today I'm actually kind of proud. Sounds weird, but I'm proud because I've come a long way, and I'm privileged enough to be able to stand here and speak. My hope is that starting this conversation now in the church can make the healing journey a little bit easier for others because I know I'm not the only one here today who's been affected.

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

In 2014, I could have used the support I have from this church now. I needed a church where I could walk in, feeling broken, guilty, and confused about my own identity and be received with open arms telling me that I wasn't any different in their eyes. I needed this community. You see, when you experience something like rape, it has a lasting impact. It shakes your core, your identity. Who am I to have let something like this happen to myself? How do I move on from this? How has this changed me as a person? There's no doubt that it's changed me. I double or triple check the locks on my door at night. I'll constantly look over my shoulder if I'm walking to or from my car at night. I avoid people named Dan. I get sick to my stomach when I see someone that slightly resembles him or when I drive by that house. I panic and over analyze when a guy offers to buy me a drink on a date. October 24th is no longer a normal day for me. It will always be the anniversary of that night. Those aren't the only ways it's changed me though. I now have a loud voice. I'm even more stubborn. I'm not afraid to advocate for my needs, and self-care is now a huge priority. I'm actively working on being comfortable and confident saying "no". I am also extremely dedicated to living my life to the fullest, trying new things, and going on adventures! I refuse to let him hold me back in any way.

I have to be honest and say that when planning this service, I struggled a bit with the scripture and what to say about it. I actually picked a different one originally and changed it to this once I re-read it. Today's passage speaks of God's presence with us through the fire or when the rivers overflow, and really, it didn't always feel like that. Early on after my experience, I didn't think much about God being there at all. I felt like I was just trying to get through each day, and it felt

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

pretty lonely at times. I don't imagine that I'm the only one that would have feelings like this. Where was God when this happened, and why would something like this be allowed to happen? I think the point is though, that even when terrible, horrible things happen, and we feel totally alone, we aren't. God's there, crying and hurting with us. Even better news? She loves us still the same, "Because you are precious, honored in my sight, and I love you." When something like rape happens, it can feel like the very core of my being has been violated or damaged. You feel dirty and ashamed, and church doesn't necessarily feel like a comforting place. I felt like I had to hide what had happened to me because it's "not appropriate for church", and that was the part of me that needed support the most. This is why I needed that reminder, that throughout the healing and recovery journey, at our lowest and highest points, we are named and claimed by God, and loved just the same. It certainly doesn't dull the pain, but it provides a hope that we're not alone. It might feel overwhelming, but it's reminder that this won't consume us. We will learn to move on and live with it eventually, and God is with us the entire way.

What does that mean for the church though? Our scripture might provide comfort in knowing we aren't alone, but are we acting that out as a community? One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their life. With statistics like these, why aren't we talking about this in the church? I'm going to argue that it's not just God that's supposed to be there through the fires or river overflowing---it means us, the church! We are the ones that are supposed to be acting this out! We are a powerful body of people working for positive change in so many areas, but because this is such a sensitive or taboo topic, it seems to be left behind.

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

Are we creating a worship space that feels safe for survivors to be their true self? Even on their lowest days? Are we trauma-informed and sensitive in our planning. How does our environment and building welcome people who have experienced trauma? We need the voice of the church to break the silence that is around rape and sexual violence. Not all survivors are in a position to advocate for themselves, so that's where we the church need to truly be the church and step in for them. Yes, it might be uncomfortable, especially when we often come to church hoping to walk away with a "feel good" sermon. The reality is though that sometimes we need to sit in the discomfort so that we can learn how to make a positive change. We need to normalize the conversation. It's absolutely okay to talk about rape in the church. Church should be a place people can feel comfortable expressing who they are and where they are in their healing journey. They shouldn't fear judgement, shocked responses, or even excessive pity. I believe that having a service like this is the first step in that process of acknowledging that no matter who you are or what you've been through, you are not only welcome here, but this is a safe place for you.

I want to close by sharing the words of Reverend Moira Finley, who started this entire movement, because I think she puts it best. This is her call to the church from her first ever Break the Silence Sunday sermon, and I'm now calling upon each of you:

"What we need, from those of you who don't bear the scars of rape, is for you to listen. We need for you to listen to our stories, to not turn away. Yes, it will be uncomfortable and yes, it will break your heart. We need you to deal with all of that, all of your own discomfort, so that you can listen to us, support us, encourage us as we deal with the winding, difficult journey of healing. We need you to listen to our

Break the Silence Sunday Sermon

fears, to try to understand our anxieties. We need you to be patient with how we tell our stories, with the stops and starts, with a sudden flood of memories that come and have to be shared or they will overwhelm us. We need you to hear the details, the awful specific things that happened, and we need you to understand that sometimes we can't share those details with you, or with anyone. We need you to try and understand what it's like to live with post-traumatic stress disorder, to need to sit on a particular side of the table, or triple check the locks on the door, or a thousand other things that help us navigate our days while our brains, and hearts are torn between the present and the past. We need to know that we aren't a burden to you, that you're in this with us for the long haul, that you'll stand with us in the good days when we are enjoying life, because we do have them, but also in the dark days of self-doubt, fear, anxiety, and despair, because we have those days as well. We need your voices, the voices of allies in this struggle, to stand with us and help us change the world, to create a future where no more people face the sleepless nights burdened by memories of what someone else inflicted on us, a future where saying "no" is respected, and a future where children will have to ask "what was rape?".

Amen.