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July 14, 2019
Judges 11:29-40
Faith and Forgotten Stories

The story of Jephthah's vow is a story I had never heard until I went to seminary. I'd never heard it read at church, never come across it in a Sunday School lesson, never heard a sermon preached about it. I can still remember reading the story during my very first semester of seminary. It was in my Old Testament course, and we were studying "difficult texts." This story is considered "difficult" because it upsets people, it makes them angry, it confuses them, and it often leads people to ask questions which are tough to answer.

So when Kirby said he was going "off lectionary" for some of the summer, and looking at passages about Faith – I knew this was what I wanted to preach on. Why is this passage even in the Bible? Can't we just ignore it? We could, but I am a firm believer that there is almost ALWAYS more to any story we encounter. That goes for stories in the Bible or stories in the news or stories in our own lives.

So this morning, I ask you to struggle a bit with me on this difficult story. Listen to the stories of our two characters, first the voice of Jephthah and then the voice of Jephthah's daughter. Listen with open ears and an open heart.

***** PAUSE *****

My name is Jephthah and I am a great warrior. My father's name is Gilead. My mother - she was a prostitute. My half-brothers, who are of legitimate birth, long ago forced me from my father's house. They made it quite clear I wouldn't get an inheritance from my father. After being kicked out, I ended up in the land of Tob, where I was forced to take up a life of crime. I went raiding with other outlaws, proving that I am a great warrior.

But all I really wanted was to belong. The days I spent in my father's house seem like a dream, as if they never really happened at all. Those memories burn within my heart. All I want is what I deserve – my birthright as my father's son and the respect of my people. Without those, I really have nothing. I only have one child, and not even a son. Nothing has gone right in my life. All I can do is be angry and fight. That is why I am a great warrior.

Then one day, the Ammonites declared war against Israel. The elders came to find me. They wanted to bring me back to help them fight their war. Now I knew this was my big chance. I let the elders know I wasn't too excited about their idea. I knew why they had come; they needed me! They needed the one good thing I had left in this world; my strength and courage as a mighty warrior. So I made them an offer; "If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your leader." They accepted my offer, and I returned home.

Here was my chance, the chance of a lifetime. All I needed to do, was win the battle with the Ammonites. I was sure that I could win, since the Lord, the God of Israel, was

with me. And then a thought crept into my mind; what if I didn't win? Where would I be if I, Jephthah the great warrior, actually lost this battle? My entire future rested on this one battle. I couldn't shake the thought. What if ... How could I ever bear giving up again all that I had just regained?

So I got down on my knees and prayed to Yahweh. I just had to be sure God would be with me. So I made a vow to God. I would sacrifice one from my Household as a burnt offering, if God would help me defeat the Ammonites. I would offer up the first person I met when I returned home victorious. I believed this sacrifice would ensure my success in battle.

I fought the Ammonites and I won. I proved myself as a great warrior, and was now the head of the community. What a joyful day! All I had ever wanted and hoped for was mine. After so many years of isolation and rejection. I wanted to shout it from the highest mountain. But when I returned home to share my good news, my daughter, my only child, ran to greet me.

For a moment, when I saw her happy face, I was joyous with her. But then I remembered my vow to God. My daughter, my only child, would be the one I must sacrifice to God. I tore my clothes. How could this be? This was to be my day of rejoicing. Now I needed to tell my daughter she must be sacrificed to the Lord. I had made a vow to the Lord and I couldn't break it. Why did she have to be the first one to come out to greet me?

***** Pause *****

I am the daughter of Jephthah. My name is not remembered. I never knew my mother. I have no brothers or sisters. I am not married. I have only my father to protect me. He used to be a criminal, and I was very nervous that he might be killed. My father is everything to me. He's all I have.

Our lives totally changed when the Ammonites declared war on Israel. Suddenly we were moved to my father's homeland, where he was to become commander over his people. This was more than he could have ever dreamed. He often spoke of what it was like when he was young, growing up in his father's house. He would have done anything to regain his place in the community.

My father told me all he had to do was win the war against the Ammonites. He is a great warrior, and I trusted the Lord to see him victorious through the battle. And I was right; my father was victorious. I was so excited when I heard the news. I could barely wait for his return. I saw him in the distance and I quickly ran to greet him, dancing and making music with my timbrels. I knew how happy he would be and I wanted to share in his joy. But as I got close, his face suddenly changed! Then he began to tear his clothes, and his words told me I was the cause of his great sorrow! My father had made a vow to the Lord. I was to be offered up to the Lord as a burnt offering!

How could my father have made such a vow? He knows the custom of women coming out to rejoice as the men return home from battle. He knows of the commandment,

“Thou shalt not kill.” And if he didn’t expect me to come to greet him, who did he expect? If not me, then one of the servants! Do our lives mean so little to him? Couldn’t he have made some other type of vow?

It’s been almost two months now since my father returned home and told me of his vow to God. I remember my first thought; I realized I would die childless. If only I had been married, and had the chance to bear a son. Then I would be remembered. How will I be remembered now?

In these past weeks I have been asking a lot of questions. As soon as I realized I would die childless, I asked my father to allow me two months so I could come to the mountains with my friends to weep for my virginity. I know what my father vowed to God must be done. He can’t take back his words. I only wish he had never said those words. To know I will be killed by my own father.

But my friends have been with me. We cry together, sing together, pray together, and dance together. Their presence has made this time so much easier. I have been violated, betrayed by the person I most trusted and counted on for protection. When we weep together, the tears are not just for me. We all know it could have been any one of us. We cry for all women who have suffered. I am not alone in my despair, and I know these friends will not forget me.

What if I had been a son instead of a daughter? Would my father still have made his vow? Would he still be planning to keep his vow? I remember the story about Abraham and Isaac. Is it possible that God will save me just as God saved Isaac? But the situation isn’t quite the same. It was God who called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but my father offered to sacrifice one from his household. God was testing the faithfulness of Abraham, but my father, he didn’t trust the faithfulness of God. “I am being sacrificed for his unfaithfulness.”

I am angry with my father. If he had just trusted God. I know how important winning this battle was to him. But when I came out to greet him, he blamed me for causing him great trouble! As if it was all my fault! I felt so alone, the victim of my father’s unfaithfulness, with no one to protect me, no one to comfort me, no one to cry for me.

But here in the mountains, my companions, they have protected me, they have comforted me and cried with me. They will be my strength as I return home. They will be my courage as I face my father. They will be my hope as I face my death. But I am scared. Will I be remembered?

***** PAUSE *****

YES, she will be remembered! Jephthah’s daughter was remembered each year when the Israelite women spent four days lamenting her life. She is remembered in the words of scripture. She is remembered now as I share her story with you. And I hope she will be remembered in the future as we go out and share her story with others. For this story is much more than a story about Jephthah’s vow. It is a painful and tragic story with two innocent victims of circumstance. Jephthah was the victim of his brothers and

a society that allowed the casting out of illegitimate children. Jephthah's daughter was the victim of her father's faithfulness to a vow made in unfaithfulness and to a society that allowed that vow to be fulfilled. There is always more to the story.

We see the victimizer was first the victim. It's the same vicious cycle that still exists today in many situations of violence. And it is a cycle that needs to be talked about, in order to be stopped. What Jephthah's daughter wanted was for her story to be remembered, to be retold, so it wouldn't happen again.

For many years, the story of Jephthah's vow was held up as an example of being faithful to one's promises to God.

- But my faith is in a God who does not demand us to make such bargains.
- My faith is in a God who weeps with those caught in the cycle of violence, poverty or abuse.
- My faith is in a God who calls us to Love God with all our heart, soul and strength, and our neighbor as yourself.
- My faith is in a God who helps us to hear stories in a new way and to see hope in our broken world.

Let us remember the story of Jephthah and Jephthah's daughter. Let us wrestle with the ways it challenges our faith. Amen