

## MEN IN ME TOO

Cedars UU Church, VETERANS DAY Sunday

November 11, 2018

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STORY for ALL AGES –

*Coyote and the Boulder*. Based on *Iktomi and the Boulder* by Paul Goble

I tell this funny story to remind you that when you give something, you must make sure you give it honestly and give it forever. More important; when you take something, make sure you have the full permission of the giver to take it. If you do these things, you will not get flattened like Coyote.

SERMON –

Gwyneth Paltrow was 22 when she was hired to be the lead in the movie *Emma*. Her boyfriend at the time was Brad Pitt, who at 33 years of age, had gotten some attention for a couple of movies. One of the executive producers of *Emma* was the successful, 43-year-old, Harvey Weinstein. You should all know that Producers have a lot of power and can even fire a lead actor in the middle of shooting a movie. So, Gwyneth and Mr. Weinstein have a meeting to discuss how she will approach her role. As often happens in the movie business when people work on films in various locations, the meeting is in a hotel room. There, Harvey Weinstein makes sexual advances. Ms. Paltrow rejects him. Afraid for her career and reputation, she tells her boyfriend. Some days or weeks later Brad Pitt meets Harvey Weinstein at a party, and he confronts him, pushes him on the chest and yells, “You will never do that to Gwyneth again.” Pitt grew up in Missouri, and he then threatened this man, ten years his senior, with a “Missouri whooping.”

Now, this is a story of a man reacting to the sexual harassment of a young woman. It presents the two roles of stereotypical American manhood. Either you are a bad guy or a good guy, a perpetrator or a defender. One problem I have with the Paltrow - Pitt story is that Brad only defends “his” woman. As we know after 2017, Weinstein abused his power with more than 80 women during several decades. But Brad only focused on protecting one person. He did not point out that Weinstein was not and is not the only “bad actor” if you will. He did not say, “we all have a problem here in our business.”

As I began listening to many reports of the me-too movement, and listening to women around me, I wondered if someone who identifies as a male had much of a role in the movement.

The "me-too" movement, because of its focus on abuse of power, bad behavior, and punishment for those actions, has tended to be very unclear about what is good behavior. The only options for those who identify as women are as accuser or supporter. Men and others can only seem, to have two options, "avoid bad behavior" or "side with the accusers and throw the first stone." Perhaps there is a third option: a male can be a perpetrator, judge or bystander. Transgender and genderqueer people don't seem to have any better options.

But we miss the point if we fall into the trap of narrow justice. In our culture, like many, the word "justice" is reduced to merely "punishing people for breaking the rules." Sometimes, people will question the so-called *criminal justice system* about its fairness, but those questions are often ineffective and shallow. I come at the word "justice" from a religious and Biblical perspective. Creating justice is not about punishing bad people, it is about creating harmony, healing, compassion, equity through inclusion, and restoration of wholeness. This idea of justice is part of what we mean in Cedars' mission statement, "serving justice with compassion." It means ensuring dignity, equity, and wholeness in human relations.

Figuring out who the jerks are and getting them fired is not justice. Getting them to admit the harm they caused and trying to repair that harm, is starting in the right direction, but it is not the end by a long shot. Not being a perpetrator of sexual harassment and not abusing others is a good thing. But there is more that one can do. Ask yourself, what does it mean to be good? What can one BE, other than a bystander or condemner, punisher or perpetrator? I offer today, these three alternatives: Witness, Intercessor, and Warrior.

A Witness sees clearly and listens carefully.

A bystander merely watches but does not see. A witness sees, understands and remembers. The hashtag, #metoo, was created by Tarana Burke, she is a black activist, and at that time active in the center of New York City. She was working with young and poor black and brown women. These women had nothing, no insurance, or police protection, no insurance, no counseling, no support or advocates. It is a universal human need when one of us goes through trauma we need to talk about it. So, in 2006, Tarana Burke created this hashtag so that women could share their experiences, support one another and feel less isolated. A decade later a famous actress knew about this hashtag and used it to share her experience, and then thousands upon thousands of women joined in, and action became a movement. Time magazine named several women as "The Silence Breakers" of 2017. I think that people had been making noise for a while, it's just no one was listening carefully, no one was acting as a witness in much of the larger culture.

A report came out this last week highlighting the fact that Native American women are the biggest targets for sexualized violence. Often the least powerful are the most abused. Conservative working-class women will speak of being victims. They tend to see it as more personal and are less likely to feel a need to "tear down the patriarchy." But they know there is a problem. Among transgender people, those who transition from male to female are the most

likely targets of violence in America. Note that we are holding a Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony this November 18 at the Bainbridge Art Museum.

Part of listening well is speaking back what you hear. A witness will reflect what they hear and makes sure others hear them. Truth is about facts. A person's experience is a fact, subjective as it is. If you identify as male and someone is speaking to you of the facts of sexual harassment or abuse, ask to clarify the facts, but do not try to be the voice of victims. As a male especially, do not speak for women. Do speak your understanding, what you have heard, to amplify the voices of victims. That is what it means to be a witness. A witness will speak for the powerless to name what is wrong. Better is to give someone the power to speak and to know someone is listening. Amplify their voice, give victims a forum. Male victims need to speak of their suffering also. A witness is one who says, "I hear you."

It was good to experience that moment, in-between Supreme Court hearings, when the President of the US said, almost respectfully, that Dr. Christine Margaret Blasey Ford sounded credible. Of course, that brief moment of respectful listening was wiped out in multiple tweets and speeches over the next several weeks. The President of the US is not a witness for Me-too.

Of course, there are difficulties with being a witness. One problem with listening is that, in the search for wholeness, one must listen to the experience of the perpetrator as well. In doing so, be careful not to dismiss the victim. Witness to the whole tragedy. Then you have the power to go beyond a witness and become an intercessor.

Instead of "not me," say "no more victims. " Instead of waiting to be judge and jury and executioner, demand healing and wholeness and work for it. Instead of trying to be a "sensitive new age guy" seek to be an intercessor. An intercessor is someone who intervenes on behalf of another. To be an intercessor, speak out when you see bad behavior or show calm resistance to or renunciation of such behavior. Remember there are no bad people only regular people doing bad actions.

I heard a story this past week from a man in a grocery store, standing and looking for something. Next to him was a stranger, apparently male. Nearby was a female employee, stocking the shelves. The stranger looked to the first man as the woman leaned over and said, "I wouldn't kick that out of my bed." Many males might smile, or frown, or act neutral. But this guy, who had been trained to be an intercessor simply said, "What? do you know her?" The stranger got flustered and moved on. That was a simple way to flag the behavior without being punishing. An intercessor is willing to express discomfort with situations or actions.

To look at this question from a religious perspective here is a story that is not about sexual harassment or abuse, but about resistance and gender.

Once, perhaps thirty or forty years ago, there was a gathering of American Buddhist practitioners, perhaps a hundred people of mixed genders. The teacher leading the retreat was a male, Japanese-born Zen master. This event was at the height of the push for gender inclusive language in this country, but the man who spoke used only male terms, pronouns like he and him and his, when referring to all people. After the master spoke, there was time for silent reflection. The woman in the group, who

shared this story with me, thought very carefully about her feelings and when they were asked to do so, she raised her hand with a question. She asked, “Can a Woman attain enlightenment?”

The master barely paused before saying, “No.”

There were gasps from the group of students.

The master continued, “No women. No men. No attaining.”

On one level this story clearly illustrates one core teaching of Zen Buddhism; Do not confuse your thoughts about reality with reality itself. It is essential to see that clinging to mental categories can block our awakening to the ultimate reality and to affirm male, female and other gender identities have no bearing on enlightenment, salvation or Spirit. Cool.

*However*, on another level, this story is a perfect example of what we call “mansplaining” that is a man explaining something to a woman in a way that is condescending or demeaning, or that questions her right to question the man.

Women in American Buddhism have been changing the global nature of Buddhist culture. But, did any of the males in that Buddhist group act as intercessors? Did they talk with their master about inclusive language? Did any of the males in that group examine their language? Or did everyone skip beyond the moment in the search for the ultimate?

An intercessor is one who names bad behavior or at least expresses discomfort about certain actions. An intercessor is an individual, engaged in individual actions.

The final way of being is as a **Warrior**.

A warrior for the loving spirit, a warrior wielding the sword of truth-telling is what I'm talking about today. A warrior is protected only by the shield of faith in human goodness and the armor that comes from good behavior. A warrior is not looking to fight bad people. That is a fighter. A fighter is merely someone who wants to and can fight. A warrior is willing to take risks, be vulnerable and go into the gray spaces to defend and promote goodness.

A warrior joins with others. A New York Times article, October 24, reported that 201 high-profile men had lost positions of power in news, politics, entertainment, and business as a result of engaging in for sexual abuse or harassment. The previous year, there were only 30 such removals. The people who removed these men replaced nearly half of them with women. The struggle against the old system and bad habits achieved a victory. To say “we are not going to take it anymore” must lead beyond intercession to forging true justice.

Beyond that, it has been said by many religious leaders that the greatest battlefield is in the self. As a warrior of the spirit, your first battle is to check yourself. As our Worship Associate said in his Chalice Dedication this morning, the movement inspired him to self-examination, and to even look into his relationships with his sons.

Along these lines, I have an old Zen story. Once two monks were walking from a Japanese monastery to another. They came to a stream that had a bridge for crossing its wide and shallow waters. But the bridge had been damaged in spring floods. At the near edge was a Geisha unable to cross without damaging her silk kimono. The older monk offered to carry her across, and when she agreed to this, the second monk carried her bag. After thanks and farewells, the monks walked on. About an hour the younger monk said,

"You, of all people know our discipline. We are not even supposed to talk to a woman, and yet you carried one in your arms!"

The older monk replied, "Thank you for your concern and correction, but now I must caution you. I left that woman at the stream's edge, but you have been carrying her for miles. The warrior conquers his or her personal demons'

Not out of fear of punishment, or adherence to rules, but towards a vision of inclusion and health the warrior struggles. The spirit warrior is willing to go into difficult situations, have conversations about difficult subjects. A warrior demands more than punishment and demands mutuality, respect, inclusion, honesty in the gray areas.

Recently, the NPR program Radio Lab did a three part series on the complexities of consent and human relations. I could not find a good way to include any of that material in this sermon, except to say that if you want to go bravely into the grey areas of Me-Too, listen to and discuss those shows with mature, wise, thoughtful UUs.

No matter your gender identity, at this time I encourage you to be a witness, an intercessor, and a warrior for sympathetic joy, loving kindness, and equanimity instead of rage. Be warriors for Peace, deep peace, and Love beyond judgement.