



**RUTH  
EVERHART**

**THE**

**#MeToo**

**RECKONING**

**FACING THE CHURCH'S COMPLICITY  
IN SEXUAL ABUSE AND MISCONDUCT**



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# POWER AND PATRIARCHY

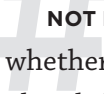
*Men are afraid that women will laugh at them.*

*Women are afraid that men will kill them.*

MARGARET ATWOOD

*No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is  
not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!*

2 SAMUEL 13:12

 **NOT FAR INTO MY FIRST YEAR** of seminary, I began to wonder whether I would make it after all. The four-year program had already begun to feel like a marathon—and I'm not a runner.

I was earning a master of divinity degree, which would equip me to receive a call to a church and be ordained as a minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Every part of seminary, from the heady subject matter and interminable readings to the demanding internships, felt all-consuming. Seminary seemed *designed* to consume us, or at least to consume every sure thing we brought with us: the childhood beliefs, the rote creeds, the heartfelt but unexamined convictions. These had to be examined and dismantled so that new beliefs could be constructed. By graduation, we would have presumably *mastered the divine*.

Judy, an older friend who had graduated and received a call to a ministry position, invited me to her ordination. I attended to see what it looked like to cross the finish line. The service took place on a Sunday evening in a beautiful, old church in a Minneapolis neighborhood. The vaulted sanctuary had long, curving pews in dark wood and a sloping floor. Organ music reverberated as a half-dozen participants dressed in black robes and colorful stoles proceeded down the center aisle. The service brimmed with songs, Scripture, and solemn vows in a mood both festive and serious. I drank it in. A seminary graduation confers a diploma, a sheepskin, but ordination confers a status, the standing of shepherd. My classmate would no longer be just Judy but *reverend*.

The pursuit of that title—at the time a forbidden status for women—had brought me to seminary. The Christian Reformed Church, the church of my childhood, barred women from entering ministry.<sup>1</sup> I felt this as a deeply personal affront. To my Dutch forebears, the fact that I was female meant ordination was *verboden*. That I felt the call of God did not matter. Whether I was smart enough, skilled enough, or disciplined enough was irrelevant. The door was shut. So I enrolled at a more liberal seminary. My professors were welcoming, but I encountered internal barriers: *Who was I fooling? I didn't deserve to be here. I would never make it.*

That evening at my friend's ordination, my whirling emotions found an anchor in the black pulpit robe presented to her as a gift. Judy would don it officially for the first time after the laying on of hands to signify that she had become Reverend Rhodes. I knew that some pastors wore such robes, but not in my tradition, where preachers wore dark suits and white shirts,

the conservative attire of powerful men. A pulpit robe struck me as outdated and ungainly. Even ridiculous. A preacher couldn't so much as fill a water glass without those flapping sleeves getting wet. How nerve-racking to walk up chancel steps with all that cloth fluttering around your feet. But for all those limitations—maybe *because* of them—the robe declared its power. It was not designed to be handy, or useful, or particularly beautiful. It was designed to convey that the wearer had entered a rarefied profession, adding power and authority to the preaching of the Word.

The ordination service was nearing its climax. Judy knelt and the black-robed participants clustered around her, each laying a hand on her head and shoulders. An authority figure prayed for the Spirit to descend upon her. Watching, I felt a flood of awe, a frisson of fear. Power was present, undeniably—but also danger.

To me, the ordination felt as mysterious as the practice of alchemy. An ordinary mortal had been transformed into a minister before my eyes. It didn't occur to me then—or for decades afterward—that the ritual of ordination might be considered, in some sense, a way of joining the patriarchy, of donning the power of a certain status.

## **PATRIARCHY**

I was five years old in 1963, the year Betty Friedan published her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique*. What she called “the problem that has no name”<sup>2</sup> described the shared female experience of being *less than* men, of being given a very limited role to occupy. Friedan's work spurred women to become conscious of patriarchy. Seven years later, Robin Morgan edited an anthology

of radical feminist writings that included the voices of women of color titled *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*.<sup>3</sup> Morgan's work highlighted the systemic nature of women's oppression in the workplace and political system. This not only raised consciousness but also called people to push back against patriarchy.

Loosely defined, the word *patriarchy* refers to laws that keep males in power, ranging across systems of governance in the nation, state, business, church, and family. Across the millennia, men's legal rights—to vote, hold office, own a business, buy property, and pass property on to male heirs—ensured that men had access to power that women lacked. Patriarchal laws also ensured that white men had access to power that men of color lacked, creating the racial disparities that afflict America today. Since the fruit of patriarchy is injustice, patriarchy is sinful.

Included in patriarchy are traditions and norms that don't carry the force of law but rely on longstanding habit and common practice. These often linger longer than laws. Examples are a wife taking her husband's name, a husband expecting his wife to shoulder the housework, or referring to a father's portion of childcare as "babysitting."

Patriarchal laws and norms descended from antiquity, so they color the stories we read in Scripture. These "biblical norms" are often used to defend today's patriarchal norms. Certainly, they shaped the way I was raised. To be a "good girl" meant being silent, docile, and obedient. In my home, church, and private Christian school, it was assumed that males would wield the power. After all, the pattern of male dominance and female compliance was dictated by Scripture.

## **SETTING THE STAGE: TAMAR'S STORY**

If it didn't involve incest in a royal family, the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 would seem commonplace: a powerful man targets a beautiful woman, deceives her, traps her, overpowers her, sexually assaults her, and then casts her aside as worthless. Had Tamar been a nameless woman, her story would have been lost to history, as so many others undoubtedly have been.

But Tamar is the daughter of David, a towering biblical figure, the shepherd boy who killed the giant Goliath with a slingshot and was anointed king. Because of her proximity to the throne, Tamar's story is riddled with palace intrigue. Amnon, her assailant, is also her half-brother and first in line to David's throne. Absalom, her "rescuer," is her full brother and second in line to the throne. When Absalom avenged Tamar's assault, years later, his action not only altered the line of succession but made him king. This is probably the reason Scripture records the story.

Even though Tamar has the power of a royal name, the story of her rape ends up being less about *her* and more about her brothers vying for power. These dynamics—both of power and vulnerability—are captured in a rare textual detail about her clothing, a "long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed" (2 Samuel 13:18). It's fitting that Tamar laments her assault by tearing the robe that defines her place.

## **SETTING THE STAGE: MY STORY**

When I graduated from seminary, my husband, Doug, was finishing his teaching credentials, our daughter was a toddler, and I was pregnant with number two. As soon as our second daughter

was born, I called the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and requested the list of churches with open positions. While my infant nursed I pored through the computer printouts. Each listing contained a possible new future.

Doug and I were more than ready to become professionals and leave our student juggling act behind. For years, we had passed everything back and forth between us like a four-handed circus performance: three part-time jobs, two sets of professional coursework, and one rattletrap car—not to mention taking care of our daughters. We dreamed of the day our family would be settled in a place where he could teach and I could preach. I purposely cast a wide net of applications, feeling excited to entertain a dozen dreams at once. Wherever God called us, we would go.

When our baby was eight months old, a call came from a thriving church in upstate New York, a thousand miles east of our home in Minneapolis. Penfield Presbyterian Church was located in a wealthy suburb of Rochester. I would be the associate pastor in charge of programs for children, youth, and families (which struck me as pretty much everyone). The executive presbyter told me that the position was a “plum.” In fact, I would be the first female to serve this prestigious church. Doug and I were ecstatic and deeply grateful to God.

Still, we felt a sense of shock at how quickly the change would unfold and how complicated the logistics would be. We needed to sell our ramshackle house—an old Victorian that cost less than a BMW—and buy one in our new community. We quickly realized that housing prices in Penfield were completely out of our range. We would need two incomes, which meant finding a full-time job for Doug and full-time care for our two daughters.

The church's senior pastor, Reverend Zane Bolinger, phoned. Appearing to be helpful, he volunteered to plan my ordination service and the reception to follow. As he said, it was one chore he could take off my plate. Bolinger was a long-time pastor, beloved by his congregation. At sixty-two years old, he was twice my age and had recently been widowed. I felt honored that he offered to preach the ordination sermon. I knew that when I knelt for the moment of ordination, he would be the first to lay his hands on my head. I felt thrilled in anticipation of that holy moment.

I couldn't possibly have known that in a year's time Bolinger would lay his hands on me again, with unholy intentions.

### **THE TRAP IS LAID: TAMAR'S STORY**

In 2 Samuel 13, the text uses the phrase "fell in love" to describe how Amnon lusted after his half-sister Tamar: "David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her" (2 Samuel 13:1-2).

Ancient texts use euphemisms too. Amnon "fell in love" and could not "do anything" to Tamar. But look! Help is on the horizon: "Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said to him, 'O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?'" (2 Samuel 13:3-4).

Can you hear cousin Jonadab's ingratiating tone? "O son of the king!" In other words, "O, you important man! You are not like other men!" Schemers have always orbited the powerful.

Whether they're tangential relatives, hangers-on, or opportunists, they know how to give influential men their heart's desire. Jonadab is the cunning type willing to offer up a woman's body to advance his own agenda.

The ruse that Jonadab concocts is wonderfully simple. Amnon could pretend to be sick. His appetite is gone, but it might be tempted with one of his sister's special recipes. Those steamed dumplings! Those are his favorite.

As Jonadab anticipated, David orders Tamar to Amnon's house to cook for him. Tamar cannot refuse the king's order, even if she suspects that she is being summoned to satisfy other appetites. Obediently, she prepares the dumplings and sets them before Amnon. He will not eat. He clears the room and orders Tamar to bring the food into his bedchamber. Is she wary about what will happen next? She does as she's told and the door closes behind her.

### **THE TRAP IS LAID: MY STORY**

Before we moved, Doug was told he could secure a teaching job with his credentials, but he soon discovered that the local schools required a master's degree, which would require another full year of classes. After a long talk we decided it made sense for him to stay home and take care of our daughters full time, at least for this season. We would have to live off my salary, which was the minimum allowed by the denomination. We thought we could scrape by since we were used to living a simple student lifestyle.

I plunged into my work. My new boss, Bolinger, said we should get to know each other, especially since he would soon be preaching at my ordination service. He took me to lunch at

his favorite restaurant. Over tempura and teriyaki he asked about the circumstances that led me to seminary. I told him my journey included a private trauma, and he assured me he would hold it in confidence. I trusted him. I also longed to move past the shame that shackled me. I wanted God to turn this trauma to good through my ministry.

So, I told him the story that I had rarely spoken about, which had been treated as unspeakable by my college and church culture. I explained that I'd been raped at gunpoint by intruders and that the ordeal had completely undone me—leaving me isolated, ashamed, and ruined. Everything certain in my life had dissolved in the space of hours. I told him these things because they were important pieces of my journey into ministry.

But the part Bolinger probed were the actual sexual assaults. He pressed me for details in a way that unsettled me, asking me questions even the detectives had not: what position did the rapist use, did he engage in “foreplay,” had I been a virgin? Noting my discomfort, he reassured me that he was asking for my benefit, that he was an expert in pastoral counseling. He pressed on. Given my history, was it difficult for me to have intimate relationships with men now? I felt uneasy with the tenor of his questions but told myself that healing might entail discomfort. As he paid the bill, he said we should have lunch again the next day. The pattern of frequent lunches was set.

A few weeks later, Bolinger hatched a plan whereby we could become “copastors.” That way I could take over as senior pastor when he retired in four years. Meanwhile, we could ask the church’s governing board to make our salaries more level. The thought tantalized me. Honestly, why *were* our salaries so far

apart? It was disheartening to work such long hours and be so completely broke.

Bolinger brought me a gift, a child-sized collectible plate and cup set. The china dishes had belonged to a very young child in the congregation who died tragically. After the funeral, the parents gave him the dishes as a keepsake, and now he bestowed them on me in the manner of Elijah casting his mantle over Elisha (see 1 Kings 19:19). I didn't see how I could refuse the gift, although I certainly didn't want the dishes. My healthy daughters weren't going to eat from them! And why would I want to be reminded of a tragic death that had nothing to do with me?

Another day he brought me a handmade heirloom quilt that had been in his family for more than a century. I still remember the heaviness of that quilt in my arms, the weight of thousands of stitches made by a faceless woman. I regretted ever making an offhand comment that I enjoyed pieced quilts. Another time he trundled a library cart containing some twenty-five volumes of Anchor Bible commentaries into my office. I knew I was supposed to be grateful for all his largesse, but I was frustrated. Nothing came of the pay raise he had dangled before me.

Meanwhile, I was swamped with responsibilities. The Sunday school boomed with nearly sixty children, and we also added a lively adult education program. I led or attended a meeting four or five nights a week. The teachers were responsive to my leadership. One remarked that the whole church had perked up on my arrival. She added, "And you've brought Zane [Bolinger] back to life."

My efforts in the programs for middle- and high-schoolers did not go as smoothly. The difficulties were not with the students

but with the eight adult volunteers. Two of these were thirty-something men, recently divorced. One happened to be Bolinger's son; the other was his good friend. I felt that both men disliked me intensely from the get-go. They called me a "kill-joy" and seemed to take great delight in poking fun of my dilapidated car, complete with my daughters' car seats. What youth would want to ride with me when they could ride in these guys' hot cars?

The adult volunteers told me war stories about the glory days in the 1980s and about my predecessor, who played the guitar and had long hair "like Jesus." They said their planning meetings used to last until midnight. When I looked puzzled, someone explained that my predecessor confiscated people's watches so that no one knew how late it was getting to be.

That seemed unbelievable, so I asked the church secretary. She dropped her voice to say she heard some wild stories about those meetings, that they served alcohol and turned out the lights for "devotions." Her voice dropped even further. She heard people sometimes sat on each other's laps. We raised our eyebrows at each other and laughed nervously.

But maybe she misunderstood. Why would anyone turn a church meeting into a late night party? I certainly wanted to get the business done and go home to my family. Doug spent all day with two small children and no car. The least I could do was get home at a reasonable hour. I decided to ask Bolinger for advice. At our next lunch Bolinger presented me with jewelry that belonged to his late wife, accompanied by an emotional speech about how much I had come to mean to him in such a short time. I plunged ahead with my questions. Did previous youth planning meetings have a party atmosphere? Did they serve alcohol? He brushed my concerns aside. When

a glass of dessert wine appeared before me, I could no longer deny what was happening. This behavior felt more like courtship than supervision.

Looking back, Bolinger's actions could be considered grooming behaviors. Whether he began his attentions with abuse in mind, I can't say. Certainly the behaviors spiraled. I do know that he attempted to forge an inappropriately intimate alliance by finding excuses to talk about sex on multiple occasions, beginning with my disclosure of my history of rape. At some point, I realized that his attitude toward the subject was lascivious.

When I realized that Bolinger's attentions were inappropriate, I told my husband that Bolinger had "fallen in love" with me. That phrase was the only way I could describe the dynamics. To say it aloud made me feel guilty, as if I had somehow led him on. The thought turned my stomach. This was 1991, before the language of sexual harassment became commonplace. I only knew that Bolinger sent out tentacles—inappropriate questions, ramped-up emotions, eagerness for attention—that entrapped me.

I felt like a hostage. Bolinger held power over me in every way. He was seasoned in ministry while I was inexperienced. He was financially secure while I was impoverished. He was well-connected in the denomination's regional networks while I was unknown. He was established at the church while I was brand new. He was the boss while I was the subordinate. He was male, and I was not.<sup>4</sup>

### **THE VIOLATION: TAMAR'S STORY**

Tamar's ability to muster an argument while terrified and trapped in a bedchamber is stunning. She cries: "No, my brother,

do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you” (2 Samuel 13:12-13). Tamar’s suggestion may shock us since marriage to Amnon would be incestuous, but it was an option. Tamar is trying to protect her social self as well as her physical and sexual self. She knows her future depends on what Amnon does. If he marries her, she will have a place in the royal family. If he violates her, she will lose that place. Even a king’s daughter can be ruined by what a man does to her.

But Amnon doesn’t seem impressed with Tamar’s ability to problem-solve while her very life is at stake. No, he is too “in love” to listen to the woman he supposedly loves. I’m grateful that Tamar’s eloquent words became part of our canon, despite the fact that Amnon ignored them. We can herald Tamar as a woman of faith who pushed back against oppression, repression, and suppression. Scripture bears witness to her brave resistance, as well as the shame she bore unjustly.

Tamar was not only King David’s beautiful daughter but also an intelligent person and gifted communicator. Despite all that—despite her fully exercising her moral agency within the limits of her power—she still became a pawn in a larger story about male desire and rivalry. Her *less-than* status set her up, creating the circumstances that victimized her, as detailed in 2 Samuel 13:14-15: “But [Amnon] would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her. Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, ‘Get out!’”

## THE VIOLATION: MY STORY

A little more than a year in, Bolinger physically assaulted me. I was working at my desk in my church office with my back to the door. Bolinger had just solved a problem and was elated with himself. He came into my office, spun my chair around to face him, put a hand on either side of my head, pulled me to him, and forcibly kissed my lips. In one reflexive motion, I said, “No,” stood up, put my hands on his shoulders, and pushed him away.

When I shut the door behind him, I was trembling with fury and fear, physically overwhelmed by the realization of my vulnerability. I immediately drove home and told Doug what happened. He threatened to storm over and kneecap the man. Beet-red, he shouted that no man could assault his wife and get away with it. I had never seen my husband so upset. I couldn’t imagine him hitting someone with a baseball bat. I was so afraid of losing my job that I found myself soothing him and wishing I had kept silent. When I returned to my office that afternoon—back to work!—a vase of purple irises crowned my desk and a note from Bolinger invited me out for dinner. I was flabbergasted and full of despair.

Bolinger and I did not have dinner. I don’t believe we ever ate at the same table again (although we did preside over the Lord’s Table together, a monthly tribulation). I did what I could to distance myself from him, such as turning my desk to face the door and keeping the door shut and locked. After a few days, I worked up my nerve and asked the church secretary to join me in Bolinger’s office. I announced to both of them that I would never again be in a room alone with him. It was a rule. The secretary nodded and asked no questions.

The forcible kiss was, in one sense, only the culminating act in an escalating pattern of abuse. But that act changed everything. I couldn't continue to pretend, even to myself, that Bolinger was well-intentioned. I sought the help of a counselor who was an ordained pastor in another denomination. That I had to pay for these counseling sessions myself was salt in the wound. After I poured out my story, the counselor advised me to count the costs and stay silent. He reminded me, as if I didn't already know, that Bolinger held all the cards. Not only was he my boss and well-connected, he was beloved by the congregation.

Meanwhile, the October 1991 news cycle covered the confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court. Anita Hill, an attorney who had worked as an assistant to Thomas, testified that he had sexually harassed her.<sup>5</sup> I was riveted to the television. Hill's testimony was brave and eloquent. I didn't doubt that she spoke the truth and at great cost to herself. When the vote confirmed Thomas anyway, I was flattened. The deck was obviously stacked against a woman who spoke out against a powerful man, no matter how well she spoke. The abuser was rewarded while the woman was vilified.

I wanted to give up, move back to Minneapolis, and have a do-over. But I feared I would never get another position if I left this one so soon, under a shadow. Besides, I liked our little house—which we'd been able to afford because it stood along a minor highway. We had plans to fence the yard and turn the walk-out basement into a playroom. I longed to see our daughters playing there, safe and carefree. I wanted to provide stability for them and for Doug, who was such a trooper.

Beyond that, I was simply driven to succeed. And much about my ministry *was* successful.

I felt trapped, a maddening feeling. Even though I knew it was unfair, I lashed out at Doug. How in the world had I become the sole support of a family of four? It was an ugly time for our marriage as the desperation of the situation contaminated every interaction with guilt, blame, and frustration.

### **THE AFTERMATH: TAMAR'S STORY**

What happens next is precisely what Tamar predicted would happen. Despite her pleas, Amnon casts her out of his bed-chamber:

He called the young man who served him and said, “Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.” (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. (2 Samuel 13:17-19)

Tamar is grieving because she has lost her place within the royal family and society. Her full brother, Absalom, says, “‘Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.’ So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house” (2 Samuel 13:20). A traumatized Tamar is banished from the story even as her trauma provides the momentum to escalate events.

When King David hears about the assault he becomes angry, “but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn” (2 Samuel 13:21). Absalom, son number two, now has a perfect reason to hate his brother. The text doesn’t say, but I speculate that Absalom’s hatred for Amnon springs as much from his rivalrous desire to seize the throne as it does from his concern for his sister.

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe Absalom really is terribly upset about what Amnon has done to Tamar. The fact is that, in 2 Samuel 13:20, he tells his sister, “Be quiet,” and then in verse 28, he goes on to avenge her assault. Both extremes—shushing her and killing her rapist in bloody revenge—treat Tamar as having no agency. Why should Tamar vanish from the story that is ostensibly about her? Why should the two male characters drive all the action and make all the decisions? Each still holds power while Tamar does not.

Two years pass. Absalom throws a grand party, a sheep shearing feast so large that King David compels Amnon to attend with the other royals. This provides Absalom with an opportunity: “Then Absalom commanded his servants, ‘Watch when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, “Strike Amnon,” then kill him. Do not be afraid; have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant”’ (2 Samuel 13:28). The New American Bible translates that last sentence as “Be resolute and act manfully.” Now that’s a text to preach on, my friends! From a biblical viewpoint, what does it mean to “act manfully”? In this case, it means to commit murder for hire. Clearly, biblical gender roles can be problematic.

After the feast-turned-assassination, the other royals flee. A runner reports to David that all his sons have been killed. But

Jonadab, knowing the rivalry between the two brothers, suspects what really happened. He puts the best possible spin on the situation, reminding David that it's likely not all his sons are dead, just Amnon. And he's right.

As is true of epic tales, the story stretches on. King David mourns for Amnon for three years, then forgives Absalom, which cues the next round of manipulation. Absalom actively tries to usurp his father's throne and battles David's army. This doesn't end well either, with Absalom dangling by his hair from the branches of an oak tree while an enemy runs three spears through him. Still, when David mourns for Absalom, his words capture the fullest expression of grief in all of Scripture: "The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'" (2 Samuel 18:33).

Note that in all these pages of Scripture, David mourns publicly for both Amnon and Absalom but not Tamar. In the Hebrew Bible, daughters simply aren't worth grieving over. Amnon raped David's daughter. Absalom actively tried to usurp his throne. Yet both of these sons evoke tears and lamentation, while Tamar's fate bears no mention. Her obedience netted her no reward. David's silence speaks volumes: Tamar's life is not equal in value to those of her brothers. How painful to be confronted with the sheer expendability of females in Scripture—yet this is our religious heritage.

## **THE AFTERMATH: MY STORY**

Looking back, I see that after Bolinger's assault I was trapped by logistics, especially the need to earn a paycheck. But I can

also identify four beliefs that kept me captive. Some of these beliefs were accurate, and some false. I believed the following:

- # The church as an institution was a supreme value, and worthy.
- # My job as pastor was a vocation to which God had called me.
- # I should be grateful for my place as a token woman in a patriarchal system.
- # As a previous victim, I had decreased worth.

Even the beliefs that *were* true—the first two—did not serve me well. The church might be worthy, and the job of pastor might be a calling from God, but these beliefs are easily twisted. Since Jesus' life and work was a willing sacrifice, Christian organizations tend to enshrine self-sacrifice as noble. This handily exploits their pastors' tendencies to overwork. But no pastor is called to sacrifice her life, or her family's life, for the sake of a congregation's dysfunction.

The dynamics around noble self-sacrifice only intensify when the pastor is female. The church, like the larger culture, devalues the work of women. Since I was the first female clergy at Penfield Presbyterian, there's no doubt that gender issues complicated people's expectations of me and their evaluation of my efforts.

Statements three and four are overtly false beliefs. The idea that women have less value than men and should therefore be grateful for a token place is the very definition of a sexist system. But women are not immune from sexist beliefs. I was raised with these beliefs and unconsciously allowed them to color my world for decades. What's more, enduring rape at gunpoint added a heaping helping of shame on me.

It wasn't until I spent years writing my memoir that I fully unpacked my feelings and beliefs about gender. Not all beliefs are readily apparent or logical. Despite my deep conviction that I was a beloved child of God, for years I struggled with feeling *less than*. This is why it's important to unearth the hidden beliefs that drive us, both as individual believers and as communities of faith.

Theologies are always shored up by two simple words: *Scripture says!* Scripture says many things, including many contradictory things. When we construct our beliefs, we must take into account the entire arc of Scripture. We must be aware of the temptation to “baptize” what feels good and right because it's known and comfortable. To many people, the male attachment to power seems natural and normal. It's not difficult to find Scripture passages that support lopsided ideas about the genders. But we must remember that Scripture exists within a cultural context. Haven't we just read Absalom's exhortation to his servants to “act manfully!” and plunge a spear into the next king of Israel? We have also heard Tamar's reverberating plea to her brothers, “Where can I carry my shame?” How we interpret these lines of dialogue will shape our church's culture.

### **THE TEXT ASKS US**

1. Where should Tamar have carried her shame, and by what means?
2. What does it mean to “act manfully”?

### **MY HOPE**

My hope is that the church will hear Tamar's question, “Where can I carry my shame?” and answer, to the church. Churches

can welcome victims and survivors, hear their stories, and heal their wounds. Churches can protect the vulnerable, challenge and prosecute abusers, and become a space that is both safer and braver.