

READ

Genesis 38

REFLECT

While Joseph's story takes up the later chapters of Genesis, it is briefly interrupted by the story of Tamar. It's a strange, uncomfortable story filled with old customs that don't make sense in our world. After Judah had a family, and his oldest son was married, that son died (and we're told it was because that son was immoral). Because he had no children, it was the next brother's responsibility to marry his wife to produce offspring that would be considered his brother's. That brother, Onan, didn't like the idea of producing children that wouldn't be his, so he didn't fulfill his obligation, and not long after he died (another punishment for immorality, it seems). Custom dictated that the next son, Shelah, would then be responsible, but Judah didn't want his last son to bear that responsibility and possibly die if he didn't fulfill his end of the bargain. So, Judah sent Tamar off to live with her father as a widow – not only a breach of custom, but likely a death sentence since she would have had no family to care for her once her father died. Time went by and Judah's wife died, and after a period of mourning, he went with a neighbor to shear sheep. Tamar heard this and removed her widow's clothing, put on those of a prostitute, and stood by the road near the city gate. Judah saw her and propositioned her without knowledge of who she was. He gave her signs of himself as a guarantee of payment, then they slept together. He then tried to come back and pay her, only to learn that there were no sex workers on that stretch of road, so Judah was perplexed. Later, Judah learned that Tamar had become pregnant after becoming a prostitute, and filled with rage, he calls for her to be burned. Using the collateral Judah had provided her with, she proved that he was the one who'd slept with her, thinking she was a prostitute, and successfully challenged a patriarchal norm that allowed men to use prostitutes as a tool for their own desire, but punish them at their own whim. Judah realized that he had done wrong – he didn't allow his youngest son to marry Tamar, according to custom. Tamar, who had been denied the care owed to her in marriage, took it upon herself to ensure she'd be cared for by the family that had disowned her.

REACT

- Tamar's story is strange because it clearly spoke against dominant cultural practices. Women were denied personhood and had to rely on a male relative for everything. Judah denied her that help, so she forced his hand. Though how she forced his hand might make us uncomfortable, she was able to do something few women in her day could – take back power from those who held it over her. How might this story be a lesson for us today?
- Judah was upset after two of his three sons died. He didn't want to risk losing his last son, so he broke long held tradition to protect him. Have you ever broken customs/traditions out of fear?
- Judah could have found a way to protect Tamar's future without buying into the custom of younger children marrying their siblings' spouses, but he went with the easiest option, instead – throwing her out. How often have you chosen an easier option, even though you knew it was wrong, when facing a hard decision? Did it come back to haunt you?

RESPOND

Letting go of and reclaiming lost power: Power is a dynamic that disrupts so much of our lives; people fight to hold onto it while others struggle to get any. Tamar was stripped of what little power her culture afforded her when Judah threw her out of his house, but she reclaimed it in an act that simultaneously shamed Judah for his hypocrisy. Judah felt he had enough power that he could use women as objects with no penalty, it was a power he should have let go of. Tamar had her power taken away, but she reclaimed it. Examine your own life and actions. What powers do you have that you should let go of? How can you reclaim other powers that have been stripped from you? As you consider these important things, pray this prayer from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Ever present God, you called us to be in relationship with one another and promised to dwell wherever two or three are gathered. In our community, we are many different people; we come from many different places, have many different cultures. Open our hearts that we may be bold in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us. We pray in faith.