

“Tangled Threads”

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25
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“The tangled threads of greed and wealth.” That’s how Wilda Gafney describes this story in her commentary. She continues, “Eli’s sons lusted for and reveled in power over the people, stealing their offerings and God’s and using their power to manipulate or steal sexual access to women.”

Sadly, this story is not unusual. Throughout history men have sought wealth and power and then have used those not just to get what they want, but to exploit, use, and even abuse other people.

In our own time, we watch as income inequality soars, with the very wealthy getting exceedingly wealthier and the vast majority stagnating or declining. According to CBS News, “The top 1% of [American] households owned 31.7% of all U.S. wealth in the third quarter of 2025, the highest share on record. . . . Collectively, the wealthiest 1% held about \$55 trillion in assets in the third quarter of 2025 — roughly equal to the wealth held by the bottom 90% of Americans combined.”

According to Inequality.org, “the collective net worth of America’s top 12 billionaires . . . has more than quadrupled” since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020.

Historical analysis points out that these economic inequities are worse than they were in the American Gilded Age of the late 19th century, when the robber barons exuded so much power over the country.

Of course, we see how this vast wealth is leading to power imbalances in our own time. As tech bros rush into an AI future with little consideration of others.

And the abuses that come with such wealth have been on display as sordid details have come out in the Epstein investigation.

Wealth and power *can be* used to uplift people and society. But our religious tradition has long cautioned the ways that wealth and power corrupt.

Hophni and Phineas, the sons of Eli, are exemplars of this corruption. So much so, that the people are responding with anger. Wil Gafney points out that there is “a collective outrage in the community” about what is happening.

And we don’t always hear of that, in either the biblical story or in human history. The people aren’t always outraged at the abuses of power, particularly those directed at women. So we take encouragement when such outrage exists.

Gafney also points out that “this is one of the few passages in which God takes retributive action on behalf of women.” God has passed a capital sentence upon Hophni and Phineas for what they have done.

Gafney sees this as a warning for any persons in religious authority who abuse their position in order to exploit others. Again, something we find is all too common, even in contemporary religious communities.

Wil Gafney concludes, “It cannot be overstated how important it is that there is at least one text in which God proclaims that it is blasphemous for men, especially men who can be read as clergy . . . , to sexually use, abuse, or rape women, using their power and authority—physical, religious, or otherwise—as a weapon.”

She also reminds that this is only a small measure of justice, given how vast the problem is.

In her classic book *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes that such violence arises from sexism. She says, "Sexism fosters, condones, and supports male violence against women, as well as encouraging violence between males. In patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power—women and children."

Patriarchal systems that fetishize wealth and power, foster such violence. These systems of domination dehumanize everyone involved in them. An unjust economic system exploits everyone. And as men are used and exploited in such a system, robbed of their full humanity, their resentment and anger gets turned into violence against others.

hooks revealingly exposes the ways in which such systems harm everyone. She writes, "To be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature, as it is to be a victim." The oppressors are compelled to act as monsters because they've been denied true opportunities to care and be cared for and have been robbed of "the emotional life that would act as a humanizing self-affirming force in their lives."

hooks teaches that true freedom—the ability to shape our destinies in healthy ways—can only become "a complete reality when our world is no longer racist or sexist." In other words, when we've "eradicate[ed] the ideology of domination that permeates" our culture. Our justice work, then, is most importantly a struggle to rid ourselves of domination—and all the tangled threads of exploitation and violence that follow from it.

Our scripture lesson today holds a tantalizing detail. We read that Eli's sons had sex with "the women stationed at the entrance to the tent of meeting." Wil Gafney poses this question—"Who are these women and what are they doing at the sanctuary?"

One clue might come in the verb used to describe them. It is a military verb, usually used to describe a mustered army or organized militia. In fact, that's generally the way the verb is translated other times it appears in the Bible. But here, English translations generally drop the military implications. For example, the NRSV translates "women who served." Gafney asks the probing question why the translators would translate the Hebrew the same way every time the verb appears, except here where it is used of women?

Even our enlightened, informed, liberal, contemporary translators can fail to properly and adequately reveal the female experience in scripture.

This seems to be an organized group of women, stationed outside the tabernacle. These are women there with intention and filling a purpose.

Gafney then draws connections. In Exodus there's an obscure reference to women positioned outside the tabernacle. In John, there is a woman who is described as guarding the temple. In Nehemiah there's a reference to a woman Noadiah, mother of the prophets in Jerusalem.

Drawing various threads together, it seems that there was a women's corps that held a sacred role in the life of the Hebrew people, attending to the worship of God at the tabernacle and the Temple.

This possibility adds to the outrage of Hophni & Phineas' sexual abuse. They were exploiting the women who performed sacred functions in the worship of God.

But this possibility of a women's corps also excites the imagination. Throughout the history of Israel's religion, leaving only a few faint references, there might have been an ongoing tradition of women coming together to perform leadership roles in the worship of God.

Wilda Gafney, whose work invites us to consider this possibility, is our 2027 Didier Seminar lecturer. I'm very much looking forward to her being with us in April.

Gafney is a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures. She is also an African-American woman, writing from a Womanist perspective. Womanism is the academic approach that centers the perspectives of women of color as a lens for interpreting scripture. Central to the Womanist approach is a phrase first elevated to more widespread public consciousness by the novelist Alice Walker—"making a way out of no way."

Women of color have lived by this mantra throughout history. Given no way, especially no easy way, by the sexist, racist, and classist societies they've lived in, women of color have had to figure most things out and make their own way, in order to survive.

Justice struggles so often focus on liberation, freedom, and flourishing. Womanists hold those ideals, but remind us that for many people throughout human history, the most important immediate struggle is simply to survive. Womanist theologian Monica Coleman, for instance, writes, "Sometimes liberation is not possible, but survival and quality of life are."

We can imagine this women's corps as a group gathering together to make their own way in the midst of the patriarchal injustices and sexualized violence of their time. And, as such, they provide us lessons to apply in our own struggles to care for one another and create a better world.

In her good book *Making a Way Out of No Way*, Monica Coleman writes, "The quest for health and wholeness in the midst of violence, oppression, and evil is a lifelong cooperative process between God and those of us in the world that occurs in teaching-healing communities for the social transformation of the world."

To be saved from these worldly troubles, Coleman writes that we must come together in communities that care for one another, working together for healing and creative transformation. "Saving . . . is making a way," she writes. Adding, "We are being saved over and over again, feeling God's continual calling toward survival, justice, and quality of life, using each opportunity to become in higher and more intense forms."

In every opportunity for healing, teaching, and creating, we have the opportunity to grow even healthier, wiser, and more creative. Drawing upon our own experiences and the collective wisdom of the community and the ancestors, we are constantly becoming something more. In a world full of violence and injustice, the work to heal our traumas generates opportunities for creative transformation.

Coleman writes and speaks from first-hand experiences. She was a victim of sexual assault, who struggled afterwards with her faith and sexuality, and worked to discover and cultivate communities of connection that helped to save her.

Creative transformation through teaching and healing are possible when we foster communities of care and connection that support and encourage one another.

We can imagine the women stationed outside the tabernacle, coming together to make a way for their own spiritual and emotional needs to be met. And then gathering to care for one another as one among them was abused. Sharing their stories, listening and holding each other, loving each other through the trauma, working collectively for healing.

The queer, Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldua, in her posthumous 2015 book *Light in the Dark*, taught about the "promise of transformative healing" that begins with the "acknowledgment of painful fragmentation." She wrote that "it is exactly these times of dislocation/separation that hold the promise of wholeness."

“We are all wounded,” she said. “But we can connect through the wound that’s alienated us from others. . . . the scar can become a bridge linking people split apart.”

Often what inhibits our healing is feeling stuck—that we cannot escape who we are. But Anzaldua reminds us that isn’t the case--“The life you thought inevitable, unalterable, and fixed in some foundational reality is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication.” Once we come to realize that the life we lead is “all made up, [then we] can compose it anew and differently.”

Creative transformation, once again.

When we release traumas of the past, we free up energy, she teaches, and are now more “receptive to the soul’s voice and guidance.”

The moment of dislocation can be a painful trauma, but it can also break us free to experience transformation. That’s the light in the darkness.

But she cautions that there is no complete end goal, no final resolution, “just the process of healing.” Our healing and our transformation are ongoing endeavors that we never finish. Part of the healing is learning to embrace this reality of ongoing process of creation, recreation, and transformation.

Anzaldua encourages us to begin to transform our world by imagining it differently—“dreaming it passionately via all our senses, and willing it into creation.” She adds, “As we think inspiring, positive, life-generating thoughts and embody these thoughts in every act we perform, we can gradually change the mood of our days, the habits of years, and the beliefs of a lifetime.”

And while we have individual work to do in that process of healing and creative transformation, growth ultimately comes as part of a community, a collaborative process. As we cultivate and care for one another, we contribute to the healing of broken world.

The vision all these women lift up is that we work together to eradicate domination and the tangled threads of wealth and power by forming communities of care that make a way even when no way is apparent. Using our creative potential to transform ourselves and one another through teaching and healing.

I like to imagine that the women’s corps, outside the tabernacle, had a vision like this. As their members experienced trauma, they rallied to care for another. They drew upon divine power to deliver them.

And we can do the same—drawing upon the power and glory of God that is ours, connecting with one another in creative ways, fostering a culture of care and belonging, we too can heal, grow, and transform.

And slowly, together, become the people God needs to bring about a better world—with more justice, equity, safety, freedom, and flourishing for all people.