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Acts of Faith

# 'What is the truth?' Pastors across the spectrum preach on Kavanaugh and Ford.

By [Julie Zauzmer](#)

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The debate gripping the country, about whether Brett M. Kavanaugh should have a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, is at its heart a question of morality. Or rather, perhaps, many questions of morality: How should we as a nation treat women who tell us they have been sexually assaulted? How do we choose whom to believe when two people have different accounts? How should we weigh a person's past when we consider his future? What behavior disqualifies a person for a high honor? What do we do when our ethics and our politics collide?

The questions call for not just senators and commentators to answer. These questions are also for the clergy.

Below, you'll find a selection of excerpts from sermons preached this past weekend, in the days after Kavanaugh testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and after his accuser, Christine Blasey Ford, told the committee and the nation that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her when they were in high school. The next day, two women confronted Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) in an elevator, before he requested a new FBI background check on Kavanaugh. Across the country, pastors and priests and rabbis grappled in front of their congregations with the topics of sexual violence, public leadership, honesty and justice.

## **The Rev. Kaji Dousa, Park Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in New York City:**

"Come let them see you," he said. Get over here. Let me show you off for my friends. Enter this room of men, and let them lick their alcohol-soaked lips at the sight of you.

Come, even though, and I quote: "Drinking was by flagons, without restraint."

"Come here. Right now," he said. He was the king. The most powerful man in the world, the king of Persia. His name was Ahasuerus — will you please say that? Ahasuerus.

You may not know his name, but, oh, you know him. The kind of man so filled with entitlement that he would order her to interrupt her important work and enter a den of drunkards with their ogling eyes.

The kind of man so accustomed to accessing a woman's body that when she refused, he was so overcome with rage that he punished her brutally. ...

Her name is Vashti, and we should remember her more. Let's say her name, too: Vashti. ...

The reader of the Bible is supposed to immediately identify Ahasuerus's behaviors toward the women as the perfect grounding of his character. Not someone to be revered or whose behavior should ever be replicated. Which is why it continues to confound me when so-called "men of God" keep showing up as just another Ahasuerus.

**The Rev. William Tanner, The Plymouth Church (United Church of Christ) in Framingham, Mass.:**

Our country is on fire right now with survivors, women and men, telling their stories, many for the first time. As I scrolled through Facebook this week, day after day, seeing another person I love telling the story of their assault and what happened when they came forward or why they've never told the story before now, I learned something. These women and men taught me, without naming names, that if I know this many people who have been assaulted, it is more than likely that I know the same amount of people who have been assailants.

Let that sink in. It took my breath away.

To care for the vulnerable, to end rape culture, we have to stop pretending that rapists and assailants are people we don't know. To care for the vulnerable, we have to start believing people when they speak up. We have to put the well-being of survivors ahead of our concern for a religious institution, an honor-roll reputation, a political future.

I am not saying that everyone you know is an assailant. I am not saying that all men are rapists. I am saying that each of us knows someone, probably more than one, who is, and we have to wrap our minds around that. ...

The ministry and church of Jesus Christ do not abide exploitation and victimization of the vulnerable. To all of us, let us be gentle and kind to one another in this tender time. Reach out to friends, talk with your kids, go to the gym, go for a run. If you are feeling fine, remember that others around you, especially women, are probably struggling. These are days of stirring pots and rising waters, and they will probably carry on for a bit. Lean into the rock of God's love. Shelter in the shadow of God's wing. Care for the vulnerable. Care for one another.

**Dr. Robert Long, St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City:**

Yes, we should know what's going on in our country politically. But I wonder if everyone was watching that day because they were so interested in our politics, or did they think they were going to hear something salacious, scandalous, and that's what drew everybody to watch?

I was watching all of this, and I thought about Hamilton Jordan. Some of you will remember him. He was chief of staff for Jimmy Carter. ... There were charges that he had been using cocaine at Studio 54. Studio 54 was an outrageous nightclub, a very hedonistic nightclub with lots of drugs and sex. ... A grand jury was called. It went on for 10 months, and at the end of 10 months, the grand jury voted 24 to 0 to drop all charges. ...

All charges were dropped. He was innocent. And that was the end of it. Except everybody had heard the story for 10 months. It was a couple years later he got onto an elevator. ... Walter Cronkite stepped onto the elevator. ... They carried on the CBS evening news all about the accusations. ... Now they were in the elevator together, and it was Walter Cronkite who said, "Of all the stories I regret in my career, yours is the worst. We handled that poorly. We shouldn't have run that story. I apologize."

Hamilton was grateful for the apology, but he immediately went back to the White House and talked to Jody Powell, who was also in the White House. He said, "Millions of people heard the accusations on CBS evening news. I was the only one to hear the apology." And Jody Powell said, "Hamilton, you need to understand. The truth never catches up with the salacious lie."

So what is the truth? It's according to who you ask because everybody seems to have an opinion of what is the truth, and they're opposite of one another, and they are so strong in their beliefs. We will probably learn more. I don't know. What I know is in the framework of how we're dealing with the issue, we seem to have lost a sense of civility.

### **The Rev. Debbie Dehler, St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis:**

There are days when I cannot forget those painful memories of being inappropriately touched, of watching people I love become stupid drunk and do dumb things. This has been a week when those memories have been magnified. ... I'm sad. I'm angry. I'm frustrated. I don't want to go back over my life and relive these experiences, but I am, I have, and, honestly, I must. ...

I'm not here to tell you who to believe — Judge Kavanaugh or Dr. Ford. I'm not here to tell you what I believe. I think I'm here to ask you to be open to listening.

Be open to listen because there are many people, like me, who have unconsciously dug up long-buried memories who might need to talk. They might be talking about it for the first time or the hundredth. I ask you to listen. ... Simply listen. Do not try to fix. Do not try to explain. Do not do anything but

provide for them the safe place in which to express their story. Respect their physical boundaries. Ask for permission to speak or to touch. This is a vulnerable time, and they trusted you to share it with them. That is a sacred gift.

And lest you think I'm not showing compassion to those who have been accused of behaviors they may or may not have committed, I want you to hear me say that they, too, need to be heard with the same kind of respect and concern.

**Rabbi David Ingber, Romemu in New York City:**

We have to lift up tonight the power of two remarkable women, who today in another metaphor I can't stop thinking about, another moment, stopped power from either going down or up in an elevator. Trapped power in a contained space and said these words: "Look at me. Look at me. Look me in the face."

Could we have had a starker symposium on what strength looks like? The tremors of power that vulnerability can bring with it, that truth-telling and vulnerability and a willingness to open, versus anger, petulance, entitlement.

But let's lift these two amazing women up: [Ana Maria Archila](#) and Maria Gallagher, two courageous young women who found power in an elevator and said, "Look me in the face. ..."

I am also a survivor of sexual abuse. ... We all walk around with scars. And what Dr. Blasey Ford did this week was gift us. She punctured a hole and said, "Let light come through this place." She sacrificed her own privacy; she sacrificed her own safety; she sacrificed her own anonymity. ... If these two amazing women who stood in the breach today, like Shifra and Puah, and midwived truth and midwived a change in power — a reversal in power, at least for a moment — something happened in that moment.

**The Rev. Costas Pavlakos, St. Katherine Greek Orthodox Church in Falls Church:**

Listen, if you're a boy or girl, if you're 15, if you go to somebody's house to drink: You shouldn't go. No 15-year-old teenager should be drinking anywhere. ... I don't know if she's telling the truth or not. You have to believe that's what happened to her. ... If you're 15 years old, don't go out drinking. You put yourself in danger.

**The Rev. Emily C. Heath, Congregational Church in Exeter, N.H.:**

Did you see the names [Ford] was called? Did you see the way she was treated on social media? Did you see how before she even spoke, her life was threatened? Did you see how scared she was when she

took that oath to tell the truth?

No matter what happens now, do you know who else saw it? A whole generation of teenagers, of all genders. And I'm sure that more than a few 15-year-old girls saw it, too. And I'm also sure that some of those 15-year-old girls have secrets that they haven't told anyone yet. And I'm sure that now at least some of them never will. They've seen what happens. ...

Talk to the young people in your life. I don't care their gender; talk to them. Tell them that they have control over their own body. Tell them that if someone is touching them or pressuring them and they are uncomfortable, they have the right to say no. ... Tell them that if someone hurts them, they can tell you, and you will believe them.

And tell them this, too: Tell them that they don't have the right to touch anyone who doesn't want to be touched. Tell them that consent matters, and no means no. Tell them to respect the boundaries that others set on their bodies. Tell them that this is the expectation you have of them because you love them and because God loves us all.



**Julie Zauzmer**

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