

Living in Exile  
10/30/05

Here's a story that just isn't going to happen in this day of caution in our schools. But it's cute and works well for Reformation Sunday: A 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. Each student was instructed to bring in an object to share with the class that represented religion. The first student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is the Star of David." The second student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Mary and I'm Catholic and this is a rosary."

The third student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Tommy. I am Protestant and this is a casserole."

Well, you might as well laugh a bit now, because I don't see that happening during the sermon this morning. This is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and it's just not one of those topics that you insert a joke in the middle of.

I think in the last two years I could name three to five acquaintances who have started attending AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). I have known these individuals for much longer. One in particular I worked fairly closely with. I had no idea that she or they were alcoholics!

There is a reason for that. Not many alcoholics are prepared to tell you that they drink too much. They are especially good at covering that fact up in their daily lives. It is a secret, which they become very adept at hiding. In the end, it takes a great deal of inner courage to admit to their addiction. Sometimes this only occurs after tremendous trial or tribulation in their personal lives. When they bottom out!

Those involved in situations of Domestic Violence often participate in the same scenario as an alcoholic. Which is why it is often such a surprise to us when their story is revealed. The victim, usually a woman, is so ashamed of what is happening in her life...so embarrassed by her situation...often blaming it on her own failure...not wanting to lose the man she loves...not wanting to betray him into more anger and abuse...hides her bruises as adeptly as she conceals her inner pain. If the victim or victims are children, they too are quite conscious of the stigma attached to those being battered. Children are very clever in finding ways to hide the evidence of violence. And the one who perpetrates the crime against another? He or she seldom wants to reveal their true colors to friends or family. Domestic violence is virtually a cover-up carried out by all parties involved. It is the story of people living in exile; in this case however, the participants have self-imposed the exile upon themselves.

Every couple of years I preach a sermon on Domestic Violence, knowing that bringing it into the open from the pulpit at the very least raises the awareness of those in the congregation. Ironically, as I do so I am reminded of the oftentimes tragic history of how churches, particularly male pastors, have responded when someone has finally found the courage to come forward. Sadly, pastors (until more recently) have been complicit in concealing the crime of domestic violence. Women, often those who have summoned what energy they have remaining just to come forward and seek counsel for their repeated pain, have instead met with platitudes from scripture. "A wife must be obedient to her husband." "Your husband is Lord and Master of the household." "Trust and obey."

We can be thankful today that news accounts have documented the extent of domestic violence, therefore bringing it to our awareness. Magazines and books have retold the painful stories of those who have come forward. Movies have helped to ensure that domestic violence is seen for what it truly is. In response, police have been trained to act. 911 operators are on the alert. Community agencies provide counseling and set

up safe houses. Unfortunately, none of this is able to entirely overcome the reluctance of a victim to come forward and seek help.

The two lessons from scripture are helpful today, although the context in which both were written had nothing to do with domestic violence. In Matthew, Jesus is speaking directly of the scribes and the Pharisees who do not practice what they preach. They are hypocritical, acting so piously before others but failing to lift a finger to ease the burden of people around them. They wear fancy robes and sit in prominent positions at banquets and in the synagogues. They lack humility. However, people have been deceived by this falseness, assuming that the scribes and Pharisees should be granted respect and honor. Jesus' words indicate that the religious leaders would do well to humble themselves before others. Indeed, God rewards the servant, not the exalted.

Of course, this is not about domestic violence. Yet, it is about seeing that which is beneath the surface. Jesus is warning the crowd not to believe everything they see – that there is more to things than meets the eye. This is precisely the case with those involved in domestic violence. Seldom do we detect the pain and hurt, because people conceal so well what happens behind closed doors. Whereas it was pride that caused the Jewish officials to exalt themselves, it is shame that causes victims and perpetrators of violence to walk around in exile. Ironically, what you find in common here is that whether it be the Scribe or Pharisee or the victims of abuse, all want to walk around the market place and to have people call them by name, as if nothing was wrong.

The verses from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians are also noteworthy. Paul is concluding a passage in which he is very frank and open. He came to Thessalonica after much suffering in Philippi. Things did not go well; there was much suffering. Now Paul arrives without trickery or impure motives. He comes sincerely, simply trusting in the power of the Gospel. Through the Gospel of Jesus, Paul reassures them that God will speak gently to them; God's care will be evident in the apostle's preaching and teaching. Paul likens the approach to that of a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. A nurse gains nothing from her kindness other than the satisfaction of caring genuinely for the patient.

So likewise today. If we retell the story of Jesus, in the midst of the congregation, we depict a God who cares tenderly for those who labor and toil, whose burden is greatest. Paul is telling the Thessalonians that God's care and concern is all they really need to hold in their hearts. To know that God's love will change their lives and give them purpose and hope for the future.

I would hope that those who are victims of violence in our homes and in society can also hear the word of God that embraces most tenderly the hurting and aching heart. "So deeply do we care for you," Paul writes. His only goal is to deliver the richness of a Gospel that will liberate people and make them whole once again.

If anyone comes to the church or to you and discloses the nature of a violent act that has been committed against them, it may be because they trust you to have the care of Christ in your hearts. They know that you will treat them with respect and kindness, discreetly and compassionately. As Paul writes, we should constantly "give thanks to God" that God's word of love is alive in us, embedded in our servanthood towards those who require and request our care.

In a previous church, whenever I (as pastor) gave a sermon on Domestic Violence or included references in my prayers to that particular topic, one woman would always say something on the way out of church. Which was unusual because she generally did more than shake my hand and say good morning. However, on these occasions, she would say "thank you for taking the time to preach on such an important matter" or "you should preach on that more often." So I knew something along life's journey had touched her deeply. I never discovered exactly what. I don't think it was to her, although it could have been as a child; she was estranged

from her mother. It may have been to a family member or a friend. She never said much more than what I have told you. Nor do I think she ever would have.

But if someone does. If someone hints at how they have been affected by Domestic Violence, take it very seriously. Treat them as you would a damaged bird with a broken wing wandering in your yard. Give them your attention. Listen to what they have to say. Give them time to express themselves. For whatever they may say, it comes from the depths of their being.

I thank God, as Paul did, that we have knowledge of God's great and gentle love, and that it can guide us as we live our lives and care for those around us.