When Silence Isn’t Golden
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Introduction

In recent years there have been many stories about domestic violence (DV) in the national media, largely due to the actions of professional athletes. Many of us don’t want to believe how prevalent such violence is, but domestic violence remains the number-one reason women visit emergency rooms for injuries. Consider the following:

- The 2013 World Health Study found that across the world, nearly 30% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. When one includes psychological, economic, and emotional abuse, that number is even higher. Men and transgender individuals can also be victimized.
- Men may face violence from women, often in self-defense, but men are far more likely to experience violence from strangers or acquaintances than they are from women.
- Research on acts of sexual violence committed against women aged 18 or older shows that men committed 100% of rapes, 92% of physical assaults, and 97% of stalking acts. Sexual violence against men is also mainly male violence: 70% of rapes, 86% of physical assaults, and 65% of stalking acts were perpetrated by men.
- In heterosexual relationships, conflict may be instigated equally by men and women, but violence rising to the level of criminal activity is overwhelmingly male (85% of restraining orders are taken out on men). A 2007 National Institute for Justice Study

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found that “more than 90 percent of ‘systematic, persistent, and injurious’ violence is perpetrated by men.”

Women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, and stalking. Indeed, the data is frightening. The 2014 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey found that

- Approximately 1.9 million women were raped during the year preceding the survey.
- One in 4 women (22.3%) has been the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner, while 1 in 7 men (14.0%) has experienced the same. For men, most perpetrators are male.
- One in 6 women (15.2%) has been stalked during her lifetime, compared to 1 in 19 men (5.7%).
- Female victims frequently experienced multiple forms of IPV (i.e., rape, physical violence, stalking); male victims most often experienced physical violence.
- Nearly 1 in 5 women (19.3%) and 1 in 59 men (1.7%) have been raped in their lifetimes (about 2 million).

Violence levels in LGBTQ communities parallel those in the heterosexual community, but LGBTQ survivors have less access to services. Moreover,

- 39% of survivors are aged 19–29; 5% are over 60
- 66.8% of survivors are people of color
- LGBQT youth and young adults, gay people, and LGBTQ men were twice as likely to be injured as a result of IPV (so, their physical assaults were more serious)
- In 2011, 61.6% of survivors were denied access to shelters
- Nearly half of transgender individuals will be raped at some point in their lifetime.

Survivors often look to their faith communities for help in the wake of intimate violence; in fact, one study tracking data across a decade found that “since the beginning of the

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project, victims of domestic violence are more likely to disclose the abuse to someone in their faith community than they are to seek help from the police.”8 Both survivors and perpetrators are in our congregations, but too often what they find there serves as a roadblock rather than a resource. Too often all they hear from us is silence. This same study tracked IPV homicides and found that “a significant number of victims (32%) and perpetrators (22%) interacted with a religious community, church, temple or mosque five years prior to the homicide.” Faith communities have great potential for offering resources, referrals, and safety to congregants.9 Indeed, our faith communities have the potential to do great good, but too often what survivors and perpetrators find instead is silence or ignorance. The recent “We Will Speak Out” study found that 65% of pastors spoke about sex and gender based violence (SGBV) once or never, 22% said they spoke about it once a year, 33% admitted to addressing SGBV rarely, and 10% said they never spoke about it.10 Even when pastors did discuss it, 72% did so because they felt SGBV was a problem in their local communities, not in their churches. So, when clergy speak about SGBV, they usually do so as a problem that is “out there,” not as a problem in their own congregations.11

Compounding the challenge is the fact that few pastors are trained to respond to SGBV, and without training, pastors can do more harm than good. In the “We Will Speak Out” study, most (62%) of the pastors surveyed provided marriage or couples counseling in response to

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11 “Broken Silence” report found that, “Of the pastors who do speak about the topic, 72% do so because they believe sexual and domestic violence is a problem in their local communities. Only 25% of pastors speak out because they believe it is a problem in their congregations.”
disclosures of sexual or domestic violence.\textsuperscript{12} Couples or marriage counseling is extremely dangerous when SGBV is present; the perpetrator will use anything the victim/survivor says against her, so if she is honest during counseling, the violence at home is likely to escalate. But when clergy are trained and respond appropriately to SGBV, they can make an astonishing difference. In one study, clergy who held abusers accountable were more effective than court orders in terms of whether or not male abusers would enter and finish an abuser-intervention program. And when both judges and clergy told abusers to go into a program, the men were even more likely to finish.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, when survivors receive compassionate support form clergy, their psychological outcomes are vastly improved.

Over decades of doing programs for clergy and churches, it was rare that I didn’t have a survivor approach me afterward and tell me her story. To a person, these women had never confided in their ministers—they didn’t think it would be safe to do so, because they’d never heard their pastors talk about SGBV. Conversely, over the years as clergy attended SGBV workshops with me, they often shared with astonishment that after they announced to their congregations that they were going to be at an SGBV workshop, women in their churches “seemed to come out of the woodwork.” The clergy had never known they were there. So be prepared—if you talk about this, survivors will come to you. You need to know what to do. But the bottom line is that when clergy get training and begin to speak about SGBV in their churches, there is the potential for survivors to become safer and for abusers to be held accountable, and thus there is potential for the body of Christ that is the church to be true church once again.

**SERMON**


Scripture:
Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

I want to begin today by telling you a true story. Abigail Abbott Bailey was a woman living in Newbury, New Hampshire, in the late 1700s. She wrote the following in her diary in 1767: “I now begin to learn, with trembling, that it was the sovereign pleasure of the allwise God to try me with afflictions in that relation, from which I had hoped to receive the greatest of my earthly comforts.” You see, Abigail was in an abusive marriage, and she thought the abuse was sent by God to test her. For twenty-five years Abigail wrote in her diary about the violence she received from her husband, which started within a month after their marriage. Her husband, Asa Bailey, was a violent, quick-tempered man who had affairs with hired help, tried to rape one of the women who worked for them, beat Abigail, and began to sexually assault their daughter Phebe after she turned sixteen, an abuse which he continued for sixteen months. Unfortunately, Abigail didn’t know that God didn’t want her and her daughter to be hurt. Her pastor didn’t talk about domestic violence, and her church didn’t discuss the matter, so Abigail was left to try to make sense of her horrific abuse alone.

After many years Abigail was finally able to escape her violent, abusive husband, managing to keep at least some of her children with her in the process, but unfortunately it wasn’t her understanding of Christianity that encouraged her to leave her husband. Although her beliefs imperiled her, it was her friends who ultimately saved her. What would have happened if Abigail had heard her pastor or church members condemn violence in marriage? What if, instead of hearing a voice of God that told her she must endure the violence, she heard a voice of God

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through her minister saying no one should feel unsafe in a marriage, and the church is here to help? What if church members had reached out with the hands of God to embrace and care for Abigail and her children, and to hold her husband accountable? What then?

In the Luke passage, we hear how Jesus was asked by a lawyer what one had to do to attain eternal life. Jesus responded that people of faith are those who love God with their hearts, soul, and strength, and who love their neighbors as themselves (Luke 10:25–28), and that this is the marker of a believer. But the lawyer pressed Jesus—he was looking for a shortcut—“Who is my neighbor?” he asks. He’s probably thinking, do I really have to love everyone? In response Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Who was a neighbor to the beaten man? The message is clear. The love we show even the least of our neighbors reflects the extent to which we love God. Love of neighbor reflects love of God, and such love requires voice and action. When we reach out to the neighbor in need, it is as though God is reaching out in us; our actions reflect God—we become the voice and hands of God.

Christian scripture contains many examples of God reaching out to those in need and condemning injustice in their lives. The hands of God are referred to as offering hope to those who suffer, and it is promised that God will protect those who love God. For example, in Psalm 37 we find, “For though we stumble, we will not fall, for God upholds us with God’s hand. . . . The Lord will not forsake the faithful ones. . . . They will be protected forever” (segments from verses 24 and 28, adapted).

The promises of help from God ring throughout scripture. Psalm 64:7–8 reads, “Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you, your right hand upholds me.” Proverbs 2:8 reads, “God protects the way of the faithful ones.” Survivors of
intimate partner violence read these verses as we do, and in the midst of their suffering and terror, they often ask, where is God? The hands in their world deliver pain and sorrow, and often they find only silence in their churches. They seek help but don’t find protection. They cry out with the Psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Oh my God I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (Psalm 22:1-2). In the midst of pain and terror, victims do try to leave their spouses. On average, a woman will try to leave her abusive spouse seven times before she makes it. And each time she tries, she is in great danger. Women who are killed by their partners are most often killed when they try to leave.

When these victims of violence try to leave, they are often failed by the very communities that are meant to protect them. Police, medical personnel, and churches may fail them. At times they are told by police that until the abuser is violent again, they cannot arrest him. So even with a history of violence, she has to wait for him to harm her again before police can intervene. Sometimes the victim is prosecuted for trying to protect herself. Marissa Alexander is one of those women. In 2012, a jury took just twelve minutes to convict her of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and sentenced her to twenty years in jail. Marissa tried to protect herself from her husband. He’d been arrested previously for violence against Marissa; one time it was for beating her while she was pregnant.

Here’s what happened on that fateful day when Marissa was arrested. She had just given birth the week before. Her husband became enraged at her and attacked her—even he admitted that he attacked her. He said, “If I can’t have you, nobody will have you.” She tried to flee, but he blocked her way. Terrified that this time he would actually kill her, Marissa fired a shot into the ceiling to warn him off. Startled, her husband backed off, and she was able to escape. No one
was hurt. But Marissa was arrested by the very police who had failed to protect her. As I have said, the jury took twelve minutes to convict her, and the judge sentenced her to twenty years.\textsuperscript{15}

Due in part to public outcry, Marissa was granted a new trial and ultimately freed. But she was in jail for trying to protect herself when others failed to do so.

Sometimes it is medical personnel who fail to help abused women. SGBV is the number-one reason that women visit emergency rooms for injuries—the leading reason! So, ER personnel see a lot of survivors. Although there are now protocols in most hospitals that require staff to ask whether SGBV is a factor in injuries, the protocols aren’t always followed well. Often women have been asked about their injuries while their husbands were standing right next to them! Obviously, if the husbands were abusive, it wasn’t safe for the wives to talk to the nurse about the violence while the husbands were standing there.

And sadly, too often we in the religious community also fail survivors. We fail them in our silence, or we fail them because we have no training, so our efforts to assist fall short or actually compromise their safety. Many pastors have admonished female survivors to go home and not burn the dinner, or to clean the house better, or to just get their partners to go to church. Well-meaning members of churches have asked survivors outright what they did to cause the abusers’ anger. These responses make ending the violence a woman’s responsibility, and blame her for it. If she only did things better—or differently—she wouldn’t be hurt. Male survivors may be told that they are responsible for supporting the family, or that marriage is a sacrament that they are bound to. One pastor said that he didn’t ask about domestic violence even when he

\textsuperscript{15} Muhammad, Latifa, “Rally Held for Florida Mom Sentenced to 20 Years for Firing Gun at Abusive Husband,” \textit{HipHopWired} August 16, 2012. Available at: \url{http://hiphopwired.com/2012/08/15/rally-held-for-florida-mom-sentenced-to-20-years-for-firing-gun-at-abusive-husband-photo/}
suspected it was happening; he just didn’t have time to get involved in something so complex and difficult. So he remained silent.

Victims and abusers are our neighbors. The scripture we read today makes it clear that silence in the face of such abuse is not an option. We know that as people of faith, we have to learn to reach out in love to these neighbors of ours.

Survivors of intimate partner violence are in every congregation, including this one. The number-one reason church people give for not doing domestic violence programs in their churches is that “it isn’t a problem here.” But we know it is. Just because we don’t talk about it in our churches doesn’t mean it isn’t there. With one out of three women and one out of twelve men hurt by intimate partner violence, it is an issue in every church.

Sometimes victims of SGBV want to cry out with the Psalmist, “How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy exalt over me?” (Psalm 13:1–3). When survivors hear silence from their faith communities in response to the violence they experience, they tend to blame themselves or believe that this is an issue too shameful to bring to church. They may feel that this is a problem that is only happening to them and wonder what is wrong with them. When perpetrators hear silence they hear approval for how they control their households.

But when churches respond with compassion to survivors, it makes a huge difference. Some years back, a woman in a domestic violence class told her class that she’d been married to an abusive man for decades. Periodically she went to her priest for help, even though he never preached or spoke about domestic violence. He told her repeatedly that she could not leave her
marriage. The priest was clear that marriage was a sacrament and that she had no right to leave hers, regardless of the violence. Her faith was very important to her and she would not go against it, so she stayed with her violent husband. Many years passed, and eventually a new priest replaced the old one in her parish. Somehow she mustered the courage and strength to once again go in and seek help. This time, however, the result was different. After listening to her story, the new priest said, “When your husband hit you the first time, he broke your marriage sacrament, and from that point on you were no longer bound by it.” The woman, then in her sixties, turned to her classmates and said, “When he said that, it was like he opened my prison door and I walked through.” At the time she told her story, she had left her marriage and was working on a master’s degree.\textsuperscript{16} The priest’s voice, his willingness to support her, probably saved her life.

That second priest enacted the love of God to this woman, and he set her free from the prison of domestic violence. We all have the power to do this for victims of violence. Most of us haven’t been trained in this area, but we can be. We can invite someone in to do a training on domestic violence for our congregation. We can post the national SGBV hotline every week in our bulletin or order of service; that way a survivor won’t be blamed by her abuser for having the information, as she might be if she is discovered with a domestic violence brochure. We can put information about local services in the restrooms. We can listen, believe people when they disclose violence in their lives, and—with training—know how to connect them to resources in our community.

As a congregation, we must act now to proclaim a theology of justice and peace. Our homes have been war zones for far too long. We can each do something! Perhaps we cannot turn

\textsuperscript{16} This comment was made in \textbf{Hist E-1207}, “Historical Narratives of Battering and their Theological Implications,” spring, 2005, Harvard University Extension School, team taught by the author and Prof. Beverly Mayne Kienzle.
back the tide of domestic violence immediately, and we certainly can’t do it alone, but together we can begin to move this mountain that is a scourge in all of our communities.

There is a story you may have heard about a man who goes down to the beach for his daily walk and sees in the distance a young woman bending over, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean. The man approaches and asks, “May I ask what you’re doing?” The young woman pauses, then replies, “Throwing starfish into the ocean.” “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” the man asks. The young woman replies, “The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die.” The man is astounded. “But don’t you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!” At this, the young woman bends down, picks up yet another starfish, and throws it into the ocean. As it meets the water, she says, “It made a difference for that one.”

We can each make a difference, one day at a time, one compassionate response at a time, one program about intimate partner violence at a time. We can be trained in order to be resources to survivors in our midst, and insure that we hold all abusers accountable for their actions. We can be sure that there will be no Abigail Abbott Baileys in this church. We can insure that at every turn, victim/survivors feel the hand and voice of God through our actions of love and compassion. How long, O Lord? With all of us together, not long.

Amen. May it be so.
Discussion Questions

1. Does it surprise you to know that there are both survivors and abusers in your congregation?
2. What actions could this church take to make sure it isn’t silent in the face of domestic violence? Would you be willing to be trained?
3. How can this church enact the love of God toward victims of domestic violence?
4. Are you aware of programs in your area that can assist survivors and abusers? Where in the church could you post information about such programs?
5. What makes you uncomfortable about discussing domestic violence in church? What part of your personal faith inspires you to reach out to neighbors of yours who are suffering such violence?