



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

O That I Had Wings Psalm 55:1-2, 5-14, 16-22; Mark 4:21-25

It is one of those poignant moments which punctuate the otherwise funny and uplifting movie *Forrest Gump* with insight and meaning. After being chased by a gang of bullies, young Forrest has “found” his legs and runs everywhere he goes. We see him running to his friend Jenny’s house as his voiceover comments, “Now remember how I told you that Jenny never seemed to want to go home? Well, she lived in a house that was as old as Alabama. Her Momma had gone up to heaven when she was five and her daddy was some kind of a farmer . . . He was a very lovin' man. He was always kissing and touchin' her and her sisters. And then this one time, Jenny wasn't on the bus to go to school.”

Forrest knocks on the door of the weary-looking house then spies Jenny around the corner. He calls her name. “Hsh!” she insists in a worried but lowered voice. “Daddy's takin' a nap.” She grabs his hand and the two of them run into the corn field. Jenny’s drunk father comes out of the house and begins shouting for Jenny to come to him. Liquor bottle in hand, he wades into the field searching for the girl.

In the middle of the field, Jenny falls on her knees and pulls Forrest down beside her. “Pray with me, Forrest,” she orders. “Pray with me.” She folds her little hands in prayer and begs, “Dear God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far, far away from here. Dear God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far, far away from here.”¹

It is a long way from a cornfield in Greenbow, Alabama to the temple in Jerusalem several thousand years ago, but the two places are brought side by side when you hear Jenny’s prayer echo that of the psalmist who prayed, “O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; truly, I would flee far away . . .” (Psalm 55:6-7a). What is just beginning to dawn on us but has been a dark secret shared only by Jenny and the Psalmist is that they have suffered at the hands of people they trusted. The Psalmist admits, “It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal

¹Eric Roth, “Screenplay of *Forrest Gump*,” based on a novel by Winston Groom, *The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb)*; available online at: <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Forrest-Gump.html>.

insolently with me—I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng” (Psalm 55:12-14). Domestic violence occurs when someone we know and probably love, someone we trust to care for us, does us harm.

Sadly, we realize that little Jenny, probably no more than seven years old, has become one of nearly three females who experience domestic violence in their lifetime.² And, like many other females, the abuse suffered from her father remains with her, shaping her self image, guiding her decisions, influencing her choice of partners, and resulting in further abuse and harmful behaviors throughout life.

Perhaps it has taken a video of an NFL player punching his fiancée unconscious and dragging her limp body out of an elevator to make us talk about the issue, but it was not unknown to us. Domestic abuse is one of those dark secrets which many people know but few discuss. Likely a third of us know a woman who has suffered violent abuse. And statistics reveal that one out of ten men have been physically abused or stalked by an intimate partner.³ And over six million children in America suffer abuse every year.⁴ Domestic abuse infiltrates every segment of the population regardless of economic status, educational level, social standing, or racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural particularities. It is time for everyone to know and to admit that domestic violence is prevalent and dangerous and must be addressed. As Jesus commented in Mark’s Gospel which we heard earlier, the point of faith is to bring light to an otherwise dark world. “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?” he asked. “For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest: nor is anything secret, except to come to light” (Mark 4:21-22).

Domestic abuse is not an easy target. Few people want to implicate someone they love in dangerous behavior. Often the victim of abuse is made to feel responsible for what has happened. Shame, guilt, and powerlessness are tools often used by an abuser. The threat of further violence, of a lack of

²Shadra Suzanne Shoffner, “Pastoral Reflection on Domestic Violence,” *Lectionary Worship Resources*, North Carolina Council of Churches, Proper 23; available online at: www.ncchurches.org/lectionary/year-b/domestic-violence-proper23.

³National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “National Domestic Violence Stats September 2014,” p. 1; available online at: <http://www.ncadv.org/resources/FactSheets.php>.

⁴Childhelp®, “National Child Abuse Statistics”; available online at: <http://www.childhelp.org/pages/statistics>.

resources to leave, or the loss of family relationships, especially with children, keep many victims bound in a frightening cycle of harm.

Those of us who are unacquainted with the horror of such a life often wonder why any man, woman, or child who is being abused does not simply pack up and leave. Were that it were so simple! Kira Kazantsev, recently crowned Miss America, is a survivor of domestic abuse. In an NPR interview, she explained that when you are in an abusive relationship, “You just feel alone. You feel helpless. You don’t feel like anyone could possibly understand.”⁵

When the video of Ray Rice hitting his fiancée became public information last week, many of us wondered why she subsequently married a man who had so brutally assaulted her. In order to allow abused women to be heard, Beverly Gooden began a Twitter dialogue asking people to share with others “Why I Stayed.” A parallel conversation sprang up with people stating, “Why I Left.” Listen to some of the admissions:

Shadelle reflected, “It is seductive to think you can heal someone. That NOBODY knows them like you do and he/she just needs help.”

Tamara remembered, “Everyone in my life at that time told me it was worth it because he was affluent and had a promising political career.”

Rachel lamented, “Because my word was the only evidence.”

Erika pointed out, “1 of the reasons #whyistayed he hadn’t hit me yet. #whyileft I realized it didn’t have to be physical to be abuse.”

Jewels explained, “Holding our 4wk old baby & told to put him down or both of us get hurt. Me & my black eye got a restraining order the next day.”

Akoua commented, “Because good church girls persevere and overcome.”

⁵Kaeley McEvoy, “Miss America, the NFL, and Domestic Violence,” Sojourners (September 16, 2014); available online at: <http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/09/16/miss-america-nfl-and-domestic-violence>.

And Beverly observed, “I stayed because my pastor told me that God hates divorce. It didn’t cross my mind that God might hate abuse, too.”⁶

All of these reflections point out that abuse is a complex evil and pulls the victim into a dangerous and deadly trap from which they often feel they cannot escape. Sadly, the last two comments remind us that sometimes religion can hurt rather than heal. Through the centuries, on the subject of domestic violence, the Church has not always spoken with a prophetic or compassionate voice. Even when support to victims has been offered, women in particular were left feeling as if verbal, emotional, and physical abuse were their cross to bear as faithful Christians.⁷

Nothing is further from the truth. While there are instances of domestic abuse included in scripture, they are not condoned by God. Most often the passages cited to support a woman (or a man) remaining in an abusive relationship as an act of faith are simply misused. One of those passages is a verse in the Epistle of I Peter. Verse six of chapter one reads, “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” The writer of this letter is encouraging his readers to look forward to the fulfillment of their salvation while acknowledging that many believers are being persecuted for their faith. In no way does the writer suggest that an abusive and even violent relationship is the kind of test of faith that ought to be patiently endured. Jesus Christ came that we might have life in abundance, full and complete (John 10:10). Jesus spoke against attitudes that were demeaning of other people. He halted potential violence that was harmful to other people. And he preached redemption from all oppression which denies the reality that each and every person is created in God’s image.

Domestic abuse cannot be tolerated whether it is directed toward a woman or a man, toward children or elderly adults. No one should be treated unkindly based on their gender, age, relationship, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or simply because the abuser has problems of his or her own. The church, of all places, must be a haven of safety and security where any of us can find sanctuary from harm.

⁶Catherine Woodiwiss, “#WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft Show the Many Faces of Abuse,” *Sojourners* (9-9-14); available online at: <http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/09/09/whyistayed-and-whyileft-show-many-faces-abuse>

⁷Lois Gehr Livezey, “Sexual and Family Violence: A Growing Issue for the Churches,” *The Christian Century* (October 28, 1987): 938; available from Religion-Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1068>.

As people of faith, it is our obligation to speak up when we see evidence of abuse. We are compelled to offer assistance and compassion to the victim. We are called to offer correction and help to the abuser. If necessary, we are obligated to inform authorities who can see to it that no harm comes to anyone in a domestic situation.

The good news is that help is available for both victims and abusers. My Sister's House exists in this community to provide safe haven and resources to women, men, and children who are seeking safety from violence. CareNet, the pastoral counseling ministry which has space in our facilities, offers counseling resources to individuals, couples, and families to help transform negative and dangerous circumstances into safe and hopeful lifestyles. Ministers, social workers, law enforcement authorities, friends, and family members are available for refuge, for comfort, and for help to be safe and secure.

In the movie, God did not provide Jenny with wings to fly far, far, far away, but her hometown police did remove her from that wretched house and place her in the care of her grandmother. She did not get wings to fly away from the horror of her young life, but God did give her wings. On one occasion, as Jesus sat on a hill and looked out over the troubled city of Jerusalem, he lamented, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37)

God yearns for us with compassion and care. God longs to protect us under the shelter of his wings of grace and security. God does not condone harm in any circumstance or fashion. God intends for life to be good for us. When it is not, God will provide the help and the hope that we need so that like the psalmist, we will sing: "But I call upon God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he will hear my voice . . . Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psalm 55:16-17, 22). May it be so with us all. Amen.

September 21, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of healing and mercy, we bring our prayers to you today and every day, knowing that you will be faithful to the promises you have made to be present with us and to sustain us through all of the circumstances of our lives. Some of us come today feeling strong and confident, and some more fragile, but we have the assurance that in our strength and our weakness, your Spirit heals us in ways we do not understand and cannot imagine. We rely on your power in our times of need. We depend on you for comfort and hope. We may find ourselves hindered by pride, paralyzed by fear, crippled by addiction, suffering from self-inflicted wounds or hurt by the choices of others. Whatever our need, we are grateful that you offer the grace of your Spirit, of loving family and friends who will stand with us, of tender companions whose example and love provide support, of trusted mentors who will lead us to you. For these and all of your good gifts, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

And we also come now, O God, to pray for others throughout our community and beyond who are in need of restoration and hope. May we be present with those who are sad or lonely, reminding them that you do not despise a broken heart but welcome its tears. May we offer consolation to those who live in fear, giving witness to the good news of your grace for the most vulnerable among us. May we attend generously and compassionately to the needs of those whose bodies and minds ache for healing and peace, sharing your powerful word of redemption and wholeness. May we find the courage to stand for those who suffer injustice and to speak for those without a voice, following the example of Christ who spoke truth to power and never ceased to advocate for the powerless. May we profess to all who long to hear it our trust in your touch of mercy that will ease our pain, in your Spirit that will inspire us to care for one another, in your strength that supports us in our crushing sorrows and dances with us in our joyful triumphs. In the name of the One on whose steady love we depend and whose mercies never fail, even Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

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