

# **Domestic violence sermon: Be safe and well. Peace. Joy. Courage.**

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## **Introduction**

Welcome to America the brutal. Our focus today is on domestic violence. Domestic violence against women is shockingly common. Every year millions of women experience battering. Every 10-15 seconds finds a woman in the United States being battered, usually by an intimate boyfriend or husband. Domestic violence is our number one public health problem for women. Spousal crime is the most unreported crime in our country today. Children carry the terrible lessons of violence and neglect with them into adulthood. Domestic violence affects the very young, the middle aged and very old in every social, economic, educational, sexual orientation, cultural, ethnic background, and religious gathering in our country. Domestic violence is a crisis and “every crisis in life is a call to healing.”

In this week’s local newspaper in the Dear Abby column, she noted that “...male batterers are responsible for the murders of at last four women a day in this country—and when secondary victims of their unbridled rage (children, relatives, neighbors) are added, the numbers probably double.” Abby shares this insight with us after consulting with experts in the field: “Batterers rarely accept responsibility for their violent behavior; and because of that, they are not motivated to change. The victims of domestic abuse are the ones most likely to be helped by counseling. They often believe the batterer when told the abuse was their own fault, but with the help of a trained counselor, this untruth can be exposed and the unwarranted guilt can be erased.”

The American dream often consists of the family being a haven for security, offering comfort, love and joy. But we live in a world full of broken dreams. Our churches and society face an enormous challenge. Often we have been reluctant and uncomfortable in acknowledging domestic violence. Sometimes we have even promoted domestic violence through well-intentioned religious teachings and societal pressures. But domestic violence is always unacceptable to God.

## **Central truth: God can change lives.**

We have good news in the midst of all this bad news. God can change lives. There is great hope for the battered, the batterer, and their children. “And every crisis in life is a call to healing.” Sam Shoemaker, founder of Faith at Work, often said that a “conscious spiritual journey begins with two words, “Help! Help!” If domestic violence is ruining your life or the life of someone you know, ask God for help today.

We can break the terrible cycles of domestic violence in our homes, neighborhoods, churches, counties, cities and country. It is God’s will for people to be safe and well in their homes. It is never God’s will for people to be terrorized, brutalized and beaten in their homes by the people they love.

It is never God’s will for us to teach our children to be next generation of batterers and the battered. We should be very concerned for our neighbor’s safety.

## ***Shalom Bayit*—Domestic Harmony, peace in the home**

Even the ancient rabbis understood people had a biblical obligation to remove potential dangers from their homes. The first time God spoke to Adam, God noted his loneliness for a companion. Adam needed Shalom, God’s peace, which signifies wholeness, completeness, and fulfillment. Peace in the home (*Shalom Bayit*) or domestic harmony was one of the first ideals for the good and welfare of all the home’s inhabitants. Peace in the home is actually considered a forerunner to peace on earth. But when peace in the home is impossible due to domestic violence, divorce has always been an option according to Jewish tradition. *Shalom Bayit* is impossible to have in a home ridden with domestic violence.

### **What exactly is domestic violence?**

“Domestic violence, spouse abuse, battered women, family violence and domestic disputes all describe the mistreatment of a woman by a man whom she lives or has lived. It can be considered a pattern of living, in which a member of the household uses violence and emotional abuse to gain control and dominance over the others. Abusive behavior takes many forms and is not limited to physical actions. But there is often a combination of physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse and neglect.”

### **Who is affected? The young, middle aged and old, mostly women and children**

An estimated one of every two marriages have experienced at least one episode of violence between spouses. Family violence is everyone’s concern. Maltreated people impact the well being of our entire community. Children carry the terrible lessons of violence and neglect with them into adulthood.

### **When religion is a harmful roadblock**

Often there is a religious component, acknowledging the sanctity of marriage above one’s personal safety. Some women believe this is God’s will for them and their clergy encourage them to stay in dangerous relationships. They have been taught marriage is forever. Even if it is physically dangerous.

Christian teaching about marriage has traditionally focused heavily on Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians and Colossians. Misinterpretations and misplaced emphasis on these texts have actually led to the horrible idea that wives and children must submit to abuse from husbands and fathers. Rather than be “the Good Book,” the Bible is used as a book to justify domestic violence.

Well intentioned, usually conservative male clergy from patriarchal religious institutions often perpetuate domestic violence without realizing it. While serving as a former navy chaplain, I remember listening with horror to three senior male chaplains during a pre-marriage counseling retreat for sailors.

The most senior male chaplain began the pre-marriage training using a story about a female dog, owned by a man who loved her very much. He began abusing her and treating her shamefully. He beat her and left her for dead. Somehow she survived and lovingly, loyally returned to her owner. In remorse, he began treating her more kindly and they were very happy together.

This is dangerous and no way to prepare people for marriage, using the biblical texts from Ephesians, Colossians and Corinthians to justify male dominance and female submission in marriage relationships. When I challenged these dedicated and zealous spiritual leaders on their teachings, these powerful senior male officers in the chaplain corps told me I “had an attitude problem with biblical authority.”

### **Equally deadly secular attitudes**

And while serving on a navy ship for two years, a number of my sailors were jailed for beating their wives. Some of my senior male navy officer colleagues would actually encourage me to look the other way when suspecting domestic violence. “Everyone smacks their girlfriends and wives around from time to time, chaplain,” they’d say, “it’s no big deal.”

But it is a big deal. Domestic violence is always wrong. It is a crime. It is a sin. It needs to stop. It can lead to murder.

## **October's local newspaper documents domestic violence**

Rarely a week goes by without mention of local domestic violence in our newspapers. Here are just a few examples of what is happening in our community.

The front page of Thursday's paper carried the story of a Kitsap County Sheriff's Deputy in jail without bail bending his first court appearance on a domestic violence felony allegation. He allegedly grabbed his wife by the throat and pushed her while their two minor children were watching.

This past Friday a man threatened to cut off his wife's face with a knife. When deputies responded to the 911 call, the wife revealed fresh bruises from her recent beating. Her husband was arrested and later released on bail.

Earlier in the month, a Seattle firefighter stabbed his pregnant girlfriend to death in his apartment.

A local man in Silverdale saw his wife in a car with a friend. He got into his own car and began pursuing them. He crashed his moving vehicle into theirs three times. The other driver had the presence of mind to drive into the Kitsap County Sheriff's department parking lot where their assailant was apprehended.

And who among us has not heard of the Bainbridge Island Victor David case that was recently held in Everett. Prosecutors said last Tuesday that they will try again to convict a man accused of abusing his wife for years, while the state paid him to be her caretaker. Jurors were unable to reach a decision on a charge of second-degree assault. David had imprisoned his wife for years on a filthy boat in Bainbridge Island. His wife had been starved and beaten and suffers permanent brain damage. She will require skilled nursing care the rest of her life from her injuries.

There is only one battered women's shelter in Kitsap County. Due to lack of space, 70 desperate women were turned away in September. 50 others were turned away in August. Many of these women are sleeping in cars and our local parks, rather than return to physically dangerous homes. Will we help them or ignore them?

## **Children are affected by domestic violence**

Approximately 50 - 75% of batterers beat their children. I know of one family whose eldest son suffered a broken arm. His father allegedly threw him down the stairs before spanking him. Concerned family members were told it was rude and impolite to ask questions. The battered wife believed it was God's will for her to remain in the abusive marriage for religious reasons after speaking to her priest.

The very sight of her second son seemed to enrage her husband. Her son now tells the story as a grown man, of how his father beat him with every tool hanging in the garage. Once his father even chased him down the street with a gun, threatening to kill him. His mother eventually had to send him away in desperation to distant relatives in another state, fearing for his life.

Today, both of these boys are now grown men, married with children. Both refuse to hit their wives and children. They insist that their wives discipline the kids, because these grown men are worried about becoming like their abusive father. "If I hit even once," said one; "it's over. I'll hit again and again." Both of them decided the terrible cycle of domestic violence would end with them, with God's help. Both men realize they are high-risk life-partners. They candidly discuss these fears and possibilities with their wives, pastors, friends and families. They are in accountability relationships. Here is the hope for children in domestic violence. God will help you end the terror of domestic violence in your life.

### **Many family members are surprised**

Sometimes domestic violence comes as a great surprise to extended family members. Let me tell the story of a young woman married someone who seemed loving while they dated. But within the first year of marriage, he began to beat her. Before she knew it, she had three young children. No one in the family knew her secret. Her husband threatened to beat her even more if she told anyone.

Their story is actually quite common. First the couple begins experiencing increased tension. The battered woman will often deny her needs and feelings to defuse the batterer's anger. In doing this, she accepts responsibility for his behavior and actually escalates his anger. This tension eventually escalates into a major destructive incident where the batterer completely loses control of his anger. This rage blinds his control over his behavior and can last for hours or days. He wants to teach her a lesson and the woman is often severely beaten. After the violence, often there is a period of calm, sometimes with kindness and contrite loving behavior from the violent one. The batterer knows he's gone to far and becomes extremely loving and tender. He will ask for forgiveness, truly believing she has learned her lesson and that he will never beat her again. And he may be quite sincere, until the next time.

One terrible night, one of her little boys called his granny on the phone. He was crying hysterically, "come Granny, help, Daddy is hitting Mommy again." Two years later, the children are still afraid to be in the same room with their father.

### **So why do women stay?**

What are common obstacles? There are many home, society, church and financial realities.

People involved in domestic violence experience powerlessness, hurt, guilt, shame, isolation, impaired trust, depression, helplessness, anger, humiliation, embarrassment, degradation and fear. Often the woman denies the abuse and excuses her abusers behaviors.

Many women are convinced their batterer will change. But the batterer will not change as long as they stay together.

Often there is a fear of exposure, retaliation or making the home situation even worse. "If you leave, you will really get it; you think this is bad, just try leaving. I'll kill you before you can leave me. I'll hunt you down and kill you if you leave me. I'll kill you, the kids and then myself."

Battered women suffer from low self-esteem, do not believe in their abilities, decision making. Both their bodies and self-esteem are battered.

Both church and society at large have historically been reluctant to identify homes where brutality and coercion take place to "normal" people. Some of the most dangerous abusers are the most overtly religious, law abiding and outwardly respectable citizens. These can include leaders in church, society and in the workplace.

Family and cultural issues pressures many women to stay. "Surely you are mistaken. You must be causing him to lose his temper when he drinks a little and hits you a lot."

Denial is the greatest barrier to getting help.

## **Good news: God can and does change lives when we cry out for help**

Here is God's good news for domestic violence. "Every crisis is an opportunity for healing." God can change your life. Here are several spiritual lifelines for domestic violence:

### **Lifeline # 1**

Jesus Christ can show us how to live. We must love ourselves enough to get help whether we are battered or battering. We must love our neighbors enough to be deeply concerned if we see, hear or suspect domestic abuse. We need to care enough to look at the situation and not look the other way. We should also be very concerned for the children.

### **Lifeline # 2**

The best gift we can offer is our nonjudgmental listening. Jesus Christ offers wise insights for all religious traditions, when he said, "come to me, all of you who are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Every one of us needs safe friends who will listen to our stories of pain and suffering, while honoring our confidentiality needs. We need wise spiritual friends and advisors who will help and not hinder those in domestic violence situations.

### **Lifeline # 3**

Help people find empowering spiritual resources. Often God seems silent for those experiencing domestic violence. Take courage. God sees. God cares. God wants you to be safe and well in your homes. God wants to empower you with peace, joy and courage. If you are feeling abandoned by friends, family members, work colleagues, and God seems silent-cry for help through praying the Psalms. Desperate people have drenched these pages with their tears, finding help in their deepest moments of need. The Psalms help us remember that God is closer than our breathing, nearer than our hands and feet.

### **Serenity prayer wisdom**

Cling to the wisdom of the famous serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." We are called to be safe and well in our homes. If our homes are not safe and well, and an abuser refuses help or to accept responsibility for their violent behavior, then have the courage find a safe place with the help of God.

### **What can I do?**

Get involved and make a difference. How can we be people of faith and look the other way from those in such dire need? Begin listening to the news. Look at the local papers for "911" domestic violence incidents. Begin praying for both adults and involved children.

Consider getting involved with the local battered women's shelter. Mother Teresa used to say, "If you can't feed 100 people, then feed 1." With domestic violence realities, be willing to help one person. Winter will soon be upon us. There are dozens of women sleeping in their cars and in our parks, for lack of safe shelter. They will be cold, frightened and hungry. As a church we've gathered warm blankets for those in dire need overseas. Imagine what would happen if we gathered even just warm blankets for those without safe shelter.

## Summary

Here are several suggestions from “A Few Ways Any Adult Can Make Ending Domestic Violence His or Her Business.” (From the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and the National Domestic Violence Awareness Project. 1-800-537-2238)

1. “Cultivate a respectful attitude toward women in your family and at your workplace. Avoid behaviors that demean or control women.
2. When you are angry with your partner or children, respond without hurting or humiliating them. Model a nonviolent, respectful response to resolving conflicts in your family. Call a domestic violence or child abuse prevention program for their help if you continue to hurt members of your family.
3. If you have a friend or co-worker who is afraid of her partner or who is being hurt, offer her your support and refer her to the 24-hour, toll-free, National Domestic Violence Hotline number at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
4. Learn about the domestic violence services in your community. Contribute your time (volunteer!) resources, or money. Call 1-800-END-ABUSE to find out more.
5. Call the police if you see or hear violence in progress.
6. EXAMINE YOUR OWN LIFE for violence and oppressive behaviors. Try to live a VIOLENCE-FREE life.”

May God bless each one of you. Be safe and well. May your lives be full of peace, joy and courage. Always remember—nothing is impossible for God. There is great hope and help for all affected by domestic violence. Amen.

### Valuable resources:

*Kitsap County Abuse Victims Service/YWCA ALIVE (24-Hour Hotline)*  
1-800-500-5513

*Kitsap County Domestic Violence Task Force*  
Faith Community Action Group  
P.O. Box 48  
Bremerton, WA 98337  
(360) 479-5392  
Email: [kcdvtf@silverlink.net](mailto:kcdvtf@silverlink.net)  
Website: [www.kcdvtf.org](http://www.kcdvtf.org)

*Rev. Dr. Sandra L. Bochonok, D. Min.*  
[www.Soulfoodministry.org](http://www.Soulfoodministry.org)  
Be empowered for life.

*Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence*  
(an international, interreligious educational resource)  
[www.cpsdv.org](http://www.cpsdv.org)  
936 N. 34<sup>th</sup> St. #200

Seattle WA 98103  
Phone: (206) 634-1903  
Email: [cpsdv@cpsdv.org](mailto:cpsdv@cpsdv.org)

*Washington State Domestic Violence 24-Hour Hotline*  
1-800-562-6025

*National Domestic Violence 24-Hour Hotline*  
1-800-799-7233 (SAFE)  
1-800-787-3224 (TTY)