

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

By the Rev. Dr. Sandra Bochonok
Bainbridge Island and North Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Association Fellowship
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Domestic violence candle lighting

“All the darkness in the universe cannot hide the light of a single candle.” We light this candle as a symbol of hope for all people locally, nationally, and globally who live in the darkness of domestic violence. We light this candle as a symbol of breakthrough, not breakdown. May it be a stepping stone, not a stumbling block. Let us break the secrets of domestic violence, lighting the way to help, resources, and safety and healing. May all that gather in this place be safe and well, with profound moments of peace, joy and courage.

Introduction

There was a sermon writing contest on domestic violence last year. The Washington Post published portions of the winning sermons in their religion section on November 25, 2000.

First place

The winner was a woman domestic violence survivor. She wrote, “Break the secret, because it is the secret that gives this thing the power. And then find out how you can get some help.”

Second place

The second place was awarded to a pastor who was a former spousal abuser. He courageously had sought and received help for his abusive behaviors. He wrote, “Generalizing from all studies done in places of worship, one can conservatively estimate for every 30 women in a place of worship, 10 are being emotionally or verbally abused and 5 are being physically abused. The women are not poor, uneducated or unchurched. She and her sisters come from every class, every ethnic group, every walk of life, and they cross all denominational lines.”

SuperBowl Sunday: “Day of Dread”

Just in case you didn’t know, there is a big football game today. Many viewers eagerly anticipate the commercials as an important part of their SuperBowl entertainment experience. But SuperBowl Sunday has become known as a “day of dread” for victims of domestic violence. In 1993 NBC made a decision to broadcast a pre-game public service announcement on domestic violence during its Super Bowl coverage. They had been asked to do this by a number of domestic violence awareness groups.

NBC graciously agreed, rather than show yet another advertisement for beer or automobiles. That is amazing when you think about it, for today is one of the biggest television audiences of the year. Imagine their viewer’s surprise when the 30-second sound bite showed a well-dressed man sitting in a jail cell saying, “I didn’t think you’d go to jail for hitting your wife.” An announcer quietly added, “Domestic violence is a crime.” This commercial has actually led many to mistakenly believe that Super Bowl Sunday has the highest domestic violence occurrences of the year. There is no proven research to support this.

But here is the bottom line: Everyday is a day of dread for victims of domestic violence.

What is it? Certainly not the American dream

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. Churches and our religions can be either great hindrances or great healers.

Football illustration

We laugh when we hear of coaches who always begin the first practice by holding up a football and telling their players, "This is a football." Good players never outgrow their need to review the basics, no matter how advanced, sophisticated, or successful they are. In the same spirit of learning, we never outgrow our need to review the basics on domestic violence.

Defining domestic violence

Here is a definition provided by the Project Family, a United Way Agency in Kitsap County that helps children who witness domestic violence: *"DV is the actual or threatened physical, sexual, psychological or economic abuse of an individual by someone with whom they have or have had an intimate relationship. It is not just hitting. It is a pattern of actions that one person uses to control or dominate his or her intimate partner through violence and the threat of violence."*

Project Family, by the way, holds classes in various locations throughout Kitsap County and their curriculum is based on the following assumptions: Children who experience DV in their families are victims, even when they don't physically witness the violence. They become the next generation of victims and perpetrators.

Dear Abby

According to a Dear Abby column from 2000, she noted that "...male batterers are responsible for the murders of at least 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 consulted with experts in the field before concluding, "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."

Remember gay and lesbian people suffer too

As you begin your welcoming process for gay and lesbian people, realize domestic violence is a problem for people from all sexual orientations. It can often be harder for them to find help in homophobic secular and religious societies.

It's an epidemic that is not going away.

According to the most recent FBI statistics, someone is battered every 18 seconds. DV affects the young, middle aged and old, mostly women and children. Batterers come from every segment of our society. Abuse knows no demographic or job-related bounds. It is a costly and devastating epidemic. It fills morgues and hospital emergency rooms, and destroys families and communities. Approximately 50-70% of the perpetrators batter their children. Domestic violence is our number one public health problem for women. Spousal crime is the most unreported crime in our country today. Domestic violence is a crisis and "every crisis in life is a call to healing."

Harsh Realities in today's world

According to the Kitsap County Domestic Violence Task Force (www.kcdvtf.org), “boys who witness their father’s violence are 10 times more likely to abuse their partners in adulthood than other families. Domestic violence in families with children is child abuse and profoundly affects children. 85% of domestic violence perpetrators witnessed domestic violence in their own homes growing up. If every woman victimized by domestic violence last year were to join hands in a line, the string of people would span from New York to Los Angeles and back again.”

Lessons from Vietnam

For those old enough to remember the Vietnam War, another resource reminds us that 58, 000 American soldiers were killed during that conflict. But during the same time period, 54,000 women were killed as a direct result from domestic violence in the United States of America.

Some examples of domestic violence

It is important to remember domestic violence victims include men. I have seen some of them in hospitals.

Yet the majority of cases affect women. Rarely a week goes by without mention of local domestic violence in our newspapers or in the news. Here are just a few examples:

Recently a Kitsap County Sheriff’s Deputy lost his job over a domestic violence felony allegation.

Today’s local paper mentioned not one, but three 911 calls involving domestic violence in Kitsap County.

While preparing my initial domestic violence sermon during October 2000, one 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.

That same 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.

Approximately 50 - 75% of batterers beat their children. I know a 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.

Sometimes domestic violence comes as a great surprise to extended family members. Let me tell the story of a young woman who 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. 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 people stay?

What are common obstacles? Denial is the greatest barrier to getting help. But 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 victim denies the abuse and excuses his or her abusers behaviors.

Many 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 victims suffer from low self-esteem, do not believe in their abilities, decision making. Both their bodies and self-esteem are battered. Family and cultural issues pressure 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." Who has not heard, "you've made your bed, now sleep in it."

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.

As people of conscience, what can we do?

- There might be someone here today who is in a domestic violence situation. Break the silence. Speak to someone today. If someone tells you of his or her domestic violence situation, believe the person. Reinforce that you are very concerned for their safety. Ask them if they have made an escape plan. If they have children, how will they seek safety if their children are sleeping or at school?
- There is also help for the perpetrators through specialized counseling and support groups. Break the silence. Speak to someone today. Get help.
- Get involved. Make a difference. Call the police if you hear or see domestic violence. Consider volunteering with a crisis hotline; donate time, money, and canned goods and good used clothing for those in shelter. Use the information in your bulletin inserts. Consider attending the March 1 lecture on Domestic Violence in the workplace at Olympic College and meetings with the Kitsap County Task Force on domestic violence. These are routinely advertised in local newspapers.
- Mother Teresa had many memorable sayings. One famous comment was, "if you see someone in need, don't wait for your leaders. You, you do something!" She would also say, "If you can't feed 100 people, then feed 1." With domestic violence realities, be willing to help one person. There is only one battered women's shelter in Kitsap County. Due to lack of space, 50 women were turned away in August, 70 in September, 115 during October 2000. Many of these women slept in cars and local parks, rather than return to physically dangerous homes. Consider offering a safe house for women to get away and think, provide childcare, donate rent money, offer a place for a domestic violence victim to live or get away to.

Summary

Together we can break the terrible cycles of domestic violence in our homes, neighborhoods, churches, counties, cities and country. It is our right to be safe and well in our homes. It is always wrong for people to be terrorized, brutalized and beaten in their homes by the people they love. It is never right to teach our children to be next generation of batterers and the battered. We should be very concerned for our neighbor's safety. Together we can be safe and well, living with peace, joy and courage.

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
Website: www.kcdvtf.org

Rev. Dr. Sandra L. Bochonok, D. Min.
www.Soulfoodministry.org
Be empowered for life.

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence
(an international, interreligious educational resource)
www.cpsdv.org
936 N. 34th St. #200
Seattle WA 98103
Phone: (206) 634-1903
Email: 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)