

## Breaking the Silence from the Pulpit

Although October is the natural time to pay particular attention to domestic violence, naming this issue throughout the year will send the message that your congregation is a safe place for persons to seek help. While preaching is important, remember that breaking the silence can also be done through public prayer, healing services, educational events and by partnering with your local abuse and sexual assault center. All efforts will send a message that your congregation understands that abuse is not what God intends.

In an article in the 2006 Domestic Violence Awareness Packet, Kevin Fredrick, co-moderator of PADVN, wrote, “It is not enough for a well-meaning pastor to launch into addressing domestic violence from the pulpit unless he or she engages in adequate educational training. Domestic violence has many levels to it, each which must be explored and understood including social, psychological, legal, and the theological dimensions of the issue. A well-informed pastor must know how the Bible and theology have been misused by pastors in counseling and preaching, most dramatically to the detriment of the victim, but even for the perpetrator. They must know why couples counseling and anger management courses are not only inadequate but may actually have dangerous implications if used in addressing family violence with victims and perpetrators.”

It is important to remember that victims, survivors, perpetrators and bystanders will be sitting in the pews, listening to your words.

Marie M. Fortune, editor of the *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, and John McClure, guest editor [vol. 4 #1, 2002], write, “Preaching is a perilous task whether for the guest preacher or resident preacher. The guest preacher has the challenge of not necessarily knowing her/his audience. But she/he has the advantage, especially when addressing ‘difficult’ issues, of being able to be forthright and prophetic, i.e., opening ‘a can of worms,’ and leaving. The challenge for the resident preacher is that she/he has to live with the ‘can of worms’ which she/he opens.”

“Preachers have been silent for long enough. The time is right for churches to get involved, and involvement must include the pulpit. We as preachers, can become agents of resistance, change, and hope. We can and must break the silence and tell the truth about sexual and domestic violence.” [John McClure, *Telling the Truth*]

In the book, *Telling the Truth*, John McClure writes about speaking out about sexual and domestic violence from the pulpit. He enumerates three goals:

- To speak a word of hospitality, resistance, and hope to victims and survivors.
- To send a message that the church will cease to be a place of easy rationalization and cheap grace for abusers.
- To invite the congregation as a whole to consider how it might become a “safe place” and a force for compassion and resistance in relation to sexual and domestic violence.

*In Striking Terror No More*, Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness, editors, we are asked to acknowledge that some scripture is irredeemably patriarchal and misogynous, but that we need to affirm that scriptures do not justify abuse although these scriptures are often misused. *The*

resource continues to speak of “flawed theology” and lists biblical texts that assist in addressing violence.

James Newton Poling in *Understanding Male Violence*, says that we need to reevaluate certain traditional doctrines:

*We need to listen to our own sermons, prayers, hymns, litanies, and all worship materials for how they will be heard by persons who are experiencing violence in their families, by persons who are in crisis right now because of violence, by adult survivors who are recovering from the effects of violence in their past, and by perpetrators of violence. The “least of these” principle of solidarity with the most vulnerable is crucial when preaching to perpetrators of violence.*

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors of *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, remind us that “throughout the centuries...the Bible has been invoked to justify women’s subordination to men.” It is important to reach into the resources that come from feminist biblical scholarship to uncover a voice that may challenge traditional biblical study and commentary.

Having read all of this, take the risk to speak prophetically and pastorally and become a place where victims can find sanctuary and perpetrators are held accountable. Both need healing.... and it starts when the silence is broken.

Resources mentioned above:

Marie M. Fortune, editor, *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, (Binghamton, NY, Volume 4, #1, 2002)

John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay, *Telling the Truth* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998)

James N. Poling, *Understanding Male Violence; Pastoral Care Issues* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003)

Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness, editors, *Striking Terror No More* (Louisville, KY, Bridge Resources, 2006)

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992)