

Sermon by Beth Truett (PCUSA)

Preached on October 12, 2001 @ The Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL

Vesper Service to Remember Victims of Domestic Violence

Service Texts: Psalm 55:4-8, 12-18, 22

Luke 22:19

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REMEMBRANCE: Where Healing Begins

Luke 22:19: Then Jesus took the loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, our Lord broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

These are familiar words...we hear them each time we participate in the Eucharist. They are especially poignant during the Lenten season. But, is it possible that they are so familiar that we don't hear them in their original context? According to Luke 22:19, Jesus knows that violence looms in the very near future. Christ is about to face the trauma of an unwarranted and brutal death by crucifixion! And while anticipating that horror, Jesus also knows that healing will be required for his closest friends...the Apostles. So a prescription to begin the healing process is provided in advance..."*break bread in remembrance of me.*

To remember...that is why we are here this evening. To remember victims and to honor survivors of domestic violence. We are not seeking to glamorize the deaths and lives of people... mostly women...who have suffered violence in intimate relationships. We are not here to raise them up as "suffering servants." Rather, we are here to mourn...to express our indignation over senseless crimes... to give thanks for survivors and to pray for healing. And in the midst of our complaints, our praise and our prayers, we are strengthened in our belief that God suffers with each woman and family, just as God suffered with Jesus amidst undeserved persecution and innocent death.

According to theologian, Flora Keshgegian, "knowing of God's presence may help one live with pain and suffering, but it is not enough to change the situation of suffering. For that we need to be able to express agency and to change the conditions of oppression."^{xiv} In her remarkable new book, *Redeeming Memories*, Keshgegian focuses on a theology of the cross that leads to an understanding of how the cross of Jesus is the ultimate sign for victims of domestic violence. By viewing Jesus' death on the cross as suffering rooted in trauma, victims of domestic violence can become one with Jesus. By refusing to glamorize the crucifixion, we stand with victims against the belief that their suffering is necessary, valuable, beneficial and redemptive. Instead we weep together with the victims and God weeps with us.

Keshgegian's stories reference victims of the Jewish Holocaust, African slavery and the Armenian genocide, a systematic violence that still haunts her own family. But we have stories too; they may or may not seem as dramatic as others. But each story is important because each individual is important. Thirty-two million women are wounded by domestic violence every year. Most of these relationships started as love stories...but ended in a woman feeling sad, ashamed, betrayed, angry...and sometimes dead. Perhaps you are not certain that you personally know anyone affected by domestic violence. But here are the tragic facts...between one-fourth and one-half of all intimate relationships include at least one episode of violent abuse²... including about 20% of teen dating relationships.³ This suggests that through your

participation in this evening's service you are probably "standing with" someone you know...even if you don't know for sure. Another way of looking at this is that one person in every pew on Sunday may be a victim of domestic violence.

And sadly, domestic violence is not new...it is not a 21st or even a 20th century crime. In fact, it is evident in several poignant Old Testament stories...stories that help us to realize that domestic violence has always been a crime of power, not of passion. In Genesis 34, the Yahwist writer reveals a crime of violence against Dinah, the only daughter among Jacob's tribe of twelve sons. In today's vernacular, we might call it "date rape." Jacob's reaction to the abuse of his only daughter is disturbing, to say the least; instead of comforting Dinah he waits to talk with his sons! They appear to be outraged, but we soon learn that their concern is over how the purported violence might affect their political stature not the well being of their sister.

You may know of Dinah through Anita Diamant's captivating bestseller, *The Red Tent*. In this historical novel Diamant gives Dinah a voice...a delightful one as a midwife. But in so doing, she also makes the Old Testament story potentially more disturbing.⁴ If, as she suggests, sex between Schechem and Dinah was consensual, not violent, then there is little doubt that the slaughter of the Hivites at the hands of Dinah's brothers was about defilement of their property, Dinah – not their sister, Dinah.

In 2 Samuel 13, we find another story that corroborates domestic violence as a crime of the *power-full* over the *power-less*. Tamar, daughter of King David, is abused by her half-brother Amnon. When she asks him to honor her with marriage and relieve her shame, he throws her out of his house. She is distraught, tears her robes and seeks help from her brother Absalom. After all, Tamar is now "damaged goods," and in the society of ancient Israel, no longer marriageable, consigned to her father's house...alive, but silenced. Absalom, David's favorite son, though pictured as angry, legitimizes the crime by advising her in verse 20, "Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." These women of the Old Testament must have wondered...where is God that protected the patriarchs? The God who had a change of mind when Abraham, Isaac and Moses argued passionately with the Almighty?

We hope that God's ear was tuned to these women's pain even if Tamar and Dinah were not able to express their grief like the writer of Psalm 55...one of the Lament Psalms that we read earlier this evening. "It is not enemies who taunt me...But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company" (v 12-14). Domestic violence is an ancient and a modern crime. And like the crimes against Dinah and Tamar, it happens in rural areas and in the houses of kings...or in modern times, houses of the affluent. Houses like yours...and like mine...homes like Michelle Weldon's. Perhaps you've heard of Michelle; maybe you've read her book, *I Closed My Eyes*. I was overwhelmed when I read her testimony. An adjunct professor at Northwestern University, she lived just six blocks from me, but I didn't know her. She was raised in a loving family in a nice small town; she had three beautiful sons and was routinely abused by her lawyer husband. Like many victims and survivors, it took her nine years to leave, encouraged by "honeymoon" periods...respite from violence that did not last, but rather, escalated. She wrote:

"Surviving domestic violence is like walking away from a raging fire that has consumed your home, your life, and your self-definition. You are plagued with details of how this atrocious fire began, how it spread, and how it took so long for you to jump to safety. Sometimes it just starts with a forgotten match. And before you acknowledge the danger, your life is engulfed in flames."⁵

Amidst the violence of the ancient world and our contemporary neighborhoods, we also pause to ask: If God is all-powerful, why doesn't God stop these crimes against women and their children? And, we may also wonder...where do I stand in this continuum of domestic violence?

What can I do in the face of abuse by the *power-full* over the power-less, especially when Scripture appears to side with perpetrators and against victims of domestic violence.

Mary Ann Tolbert, professor at Vanderbilt University, points out that proof-texting -- referencing the Bible out of context -- has been employed by churches without regard to social location when it serves their purposes.⁶ Classics include images of Christ-ordained subservience like Ephesians 5:22, "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" or Luke 6:27-29, which seems to suggest "turning the other cheek" in response to abuse. Or what about Matthew 18:22, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." This has been interpreted as a call for unlimited forgiveness in personal situations even though its context was that of settling arguments within the early church. It is helpful for us to stand in the shoes of early Christians who understood the Bible as inspirational, rather than authoritative. It enables us to take full responsibility for our theological and ethical decisions, including taking a stance against domestic violence.

So then, how might theology and ethics inform our actions going forward from this evening? In *The Cry of Tamar, Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, Pamela Cooper-White lays out a number of myths about domestic violence together with some possible conversations with the survivors. It is one of several books that are on display this evening and that will be available in the church library in the near future. As Christian women standing against domestic violence it is important, first and foremost, to believe accusations of abuse and to put the victim's safety first. It is equally important to understand the professional resources that are available and to resist giving well-meaning advice that unwittingly faults the woman and protects the perpetrator...advice like, "just give him another chance; I'm sure he didn't mean it!"⁷

Some survivors are angry, wondering like Jesus, "Why has God forsaken me?" but others are filled with shame, thinking "How could I have made such a poor choice in a partner?" "What did I do to provoke his anger?" "Am I being punished by God for my sins?" Remember that a woman victimized by domestic violence has shown great courage in speaking up. Reflect on Michelle Weldon's nine years of silence. We can support our sisters by assuring them of God's love and helping to build a community of spiritual support. By spearheading the initiative mentioned earlier, *Turn Mourning into Dancing*, the Presbyterian Church USA is taking a stand against domestic violence, and we invite your participation.

However, you are taking an important step just by witnessing here this evening...by coming together to lift up this topic out of the shadows and into the light of these candles. By your presence you are standing up against domestic violence.

Personally, I am here on behalf of all of the women I don't know, but particularly on behalf of those that I do...especially my mother. Twenty-three years ago this summer I found letters of contrition tucked away in her antique secretary. They were from my father, written on scraps of paper. Some were over 40 years old at the time, but all were asking for God's forgiveness...and hers...for some insult or another. I was amazed that she had kept these letters. But now I wonder...maybe she needed them for all of the times that he didn't apologize for his demeaning comments and controlling behavior.

I didn't know the term "domestic violence" when I was growing up in the 50s and 60s...or even in 1978 when I read the letters. But I knew that it was wrong for him to deny my mother the use of the car because he'd paid for it. And I remember being terrified when he screamed in anger, and equally frightened when he refused to talk to us for two or three days. Physical violence or the threat of it may or may not have been part of their relationship...I'm really not sure. But so many other abuses were: intimidation, economic abuse, using me as a communication conduit, making threats and using male privilege to control.

These abuses collided with a whole host of positive experiences to create a very confusing model for my own covenant relationships as a young woman. It took me a long time to understand that I lived with domestic violence for over twenty years...but sometimes I am overwhelmed with sadness when I remember that my mother remained *mostly* silent for almost fifty years!

Tonight we are here to break silence...to give voice to the *power-less* who have been abused by the *power-full*...to honor...and to remember the cross of Jesus as a sign of hope for those suffering from all forms of violence throughout the world. As I remember my mother, and other friends who have survived domestic abuse, I stand with you...remembering your friends and loved ones. We stand together mourning loss, rejoicing with each survivor, and trusting that our God rejects abuse and mourns each woman's suffering. We stand with Dinah, and Tamar, and Michelle and all those we remember silently at this moment.

Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." We remember not only to honor the past, but also to claim the present for the living and to create a future vision of how things might be. Amen.

^{xiv} Keshgegian, Flora. *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 172.

² Cooper-White. *THE CRY OF TAMAR: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 110.

³ "Dating violence common among US teens: report," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 2001; 286:572-579 [Reuters news online]; available from <http://oxygen.thriveonline.com/news/wires/2001>; Internet; accessed 1 August 2001.

⁴ Diamant, Anita. *The Red Tent*. (New York: Piscador, 1997), 190.

⁵ Weldon, Michelle, *I Closed My Eyes*. (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1997), xi.

⁶ Tolbert, Mary Ann. "A New Teaching With Authority" in *Teaching the Bible: the discourses and politics of biblical pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 174.

⁷ Cooper-White, 110-117.