

For of Such are the Kingdom of Heaven

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Patricia Ramsden

Luke 9: 46-48; Mark 10: 13-16

A little girl, four years old, sat huddled in a corner of her bedroom, when her daddy walked in. When he saw her hiding there, he walked over and stooped down, asking her what in the world was wrong. She didn't need to be afraid. Didn't she know that he would always keep her safe? He picked her up in his arms and carried her to her bed, sat her down in his lap and soothed her gently, talking to her about how he would always keep her safe and would never, ever, let anyone hurt her.

Then, just as she started to relax in his arms, his hands started to go where no daddy's hands should ever go and he raped her yet again — violently, forcibly — keeping her quiet with one hard fist hitting into her face. When it was over, he wiped her off gently, cleaning away all the evidence he could, telling her how much he loved her and how she was daddy's good little girl. He told her it was all going to be OK and he would always keep her safe.

But one day, the little girl's mother found out. Something hadn't been cleaned up well enough and she came storming down the stairs to where the little girl was playing, screaming words the child didn't even understand, calling the little girl horrible, evil names I can't repeat here. Then the mother grew deadly calm, as if she had gone away inside. She took the child by the hand and told her she knew what had to be done. She led the little girl into the bathroom, shaking and terrified. Then the mother hurt the little girl — hurt her down there where her father had hurt her too, and the mother told the little girl that she was a wicked, evil, dirty little thing and that she was never to let her father do that to her again.

Now that's not a pretty story. But it is a true one. I know because it's a part of my story. It all happened to me. Time and time again, it happened to me. Child abuse doesn't just happen to those people over there. It doesn't just happen in the poorest parts of town or in broken homes. Sometimes it happens in the house next door — and sometimes, sometimes, it happens in our houses. According to a 1992 study done by the Children's Defense Fund on abuse in the United States, sometime today, sometime tomorrow, sometime during every day of the year, three children will die at the hands of their parents' abuse. That's over a thousand children a year killed by their parents, and over 1.9 million additional children who are abused or neglected in this country alone. And those are the reported cases. There are any number of cases, like my own, that are never reported. But what can we do in the face of such horror?

The first thing we can do is to be aware, to watch and to listen. So often we just don't want to know the reality of what is going on, so we close our eyes to signs of neglect, even the obvious signs of bruises and cuts and burns. We're afraid to know. Afraid to speak out — and because of our fear, children suffer — and some children die. But the awful truth is, sometimes the signs of abuse are not so obvious. Sometimes they are subtle.

No one ever hurt me where the hurt would show; and, in order to survive, I made the memories go away. They call it incidental amnesia. I made it never have happened and I created a daddy who loved me and a mommy who cared.

I showed up for school, though, before the doors were even unlocked. The janitors would find me playing on the playground or huddled in a doorway waiting to get into my safe haven. I was the child who always stayed late to help the teacher straighten up, looking for any way to make the day not end. Sometimes the signs of abuse are subtle and we have to be able to read them and be willing to open the way for a cry of help to come into being. We have to be willing to see what we don't want to know and we have to be willing to listen to the children. Too often we are told that children who are abused did try to tell — to tell a teacher, a friend, a counselor, a minister, a member of their church.

In the face of such messages as “If you tell, I will kill you,” “If you tell, you'll be sent away,” and “If you tell, no one will believe you.” Children have taken the risk to tell, to ask for help and they were sent away — told not to make things up, told that it couldn't possibly be that bad, told to be good and to do whatever their parents tell them because parents always know best and their parents will always love them. We need to listen to the children and we need to be certain that every child knows that they matter, that what they say matters.

There is an essential element there. The most important thing we can do for our children — for all of the children — is to let them know that they matter. That they are important. That they are cherished and loved. At times, the greatest protection we can give is a safe haven of love in a world broken apart by pain. You see, the stark reality is we will not be able to rescue every child. We will not even be able to recognize every child in need of being rescued, no matter how vigilant we may be. Of course, when we are concerned for a child's safety we must talk to their parents and we must file reports when that proves necessary. Above all, we must be certain that we do not abuse. That we do not strike out.

That we do not belittle. That we do not destroy. And we must ensure that every child, every child, has one safe place to be — a place where they know they are loved and cared for and accepted no matter what — a place where they know that they too are a precious child of God's, worthy of being saved, and that place is and should ever be the church. In a world of physical and emotional abuse, it was the church that told me how much I was loved. It was the church who told me about a man named Jesus. A gentle, strong, kind man who I could trust — who promised a new life in a new place and who gave me the strength and courage I needed to claim that life so different from the one I knew at home.

It was at church that I learned of the wonderful power of God, a power stronger than any evil and any hate, a power stronger than death itself. A power and a love that would save me. It was at church that I met the people who made all those words a reality.

People who lived out the life of faith, who struggled with sin, and who worked to overcome it. I met women like Polly who folded us in her arms of love with comforting hugs and fed us marvelous homemade pies still warm from her oven and who never failed to tell us we were miracles in the making. I met Sunday School teachers of incredible patience who taught the basics of the faith and who allowed us to argue and debate, who listened to us even as teens and valued who we were. I remember preachers who played Red Rover with us in the church yard and who told us in the pulpit that God died to save us from sin and evil and that he rose again from the dead just to prove to us that he had done it. All those people --- all those men and

women — some nameless to me now — gave me life, saved my life, with their gift of faith and their acts of love, without even knowing the enormous importance of what they were doing. It's true that none of them whisked me away from the nightmare of my home. None of them could erase the pain of all the years of abuse. But that does not diminish, can never diminish, the magnitude of what they did do.

And I would maintain that what they did is what Christ asks each of us to do: to live the life of faith and to share his love so that love might touch and save those who are dying from the lack of it. As we think of the children — all of the children — and we wonder what we can do to make a difference for them in their world, I think the best we can do is to listen to a man named Jesus who said bring the children to me. Don't hold them back. Let me keep them safe. Let me tell them how much they are loved. And as for you, go and do likewise. Love the children, for of such are the kingdom of heaven.

Comment

Dr. Ramsden's autobiographical sermon serves as an example for preachers willing to speak about their own experiences of violence from the pulpit. The choice of when, where, and how to speak of one's own experience of abuse has to come from within, but can be transforming for speaker and listener alike. Pastors and other religious leaders who have been victims or perpetrators can exert a powerful healing effect on the community if the experiences have been healed sufficiently within.