

“Abuse of Power”

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 9B

2 Samuel 11:1-15

It is an old story in the fullest sense of that phrase. It is a story that comes out of Israel's first days as a kingdom. Ancient. And it is a story that continues even today. We contemporary North American people like to believe that we have made advances in civilization. And we have made a number of advances. But we have not advanced beyond this old, old, true.

King David has been in power for a number of years. He has moved Israel from being a ragtag group of nomads to a powerful nation with an effective military. David has had a number of political, military, and economic successes. Perhaps that accounts for why he believes that he can do anything he wants. A lot of powerful, successful people come to believe that the rules are made for everybody but them. They can do anything they want without fear of reprisal.

Or maybe David was feeling less powerful in his years now past middle age. The story says that it was the spring of the year and all the young, vital kings go off to make war. Once there was a time when David would've gone with them. But now at midlife, David stays home. And it's then that David is reported to have had a midlife crisis. Perhaps a feeling of powerlessness, a sense that he was no longer in control of his life, tempted David to exercise such brutal power over a woman.

Whether out of feelings of power, or powerlessness, the story doesn't say. Maybe the Bible is uninterested in ascribing possible motives for our sinful behavior. Maybe it's enough simply to report on the facts, the somber truth of the human condition – we sin, and sometimes our sin is in acts of domestic violence against one another.

Looking out from his palace window he sees a woman bathing. And so David does what powerful people often do. He sees, he likes what he sees, he wants something and then he takes it. David, the most powerful man in all the land, lusts after a young woman, a wife of one of his soldiers, no less. He lusts after her and he takes her, committing adultery with her, overpowering her (the imbalances of power are significant here). To cover up his crime, he will order that Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, be put into battle where he will surely be killed.

A powerful man commits violence against a powerless woman. Then, he conspires to get rid of her husband. I told you, it was an old, old story. Say what you will about the Bible, that the Bible is old, that much of it is out of date and irrelevant to modern people. But you can't say that about this morning's first lesson. At least you've got to say that the Bible tells the truth about the way it was, and the way it still is.

The violence that occurs in the streets of our land, the terrible harm that is done by active, career criminals, pales into insignificance when compared with the violence that is done to one another in the name of love, out of passion, the powerful victimizing the power less, violence done in bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms that we label with the euphemism of “domestic violence.”

During the pandemic, with people staying in place for months, police reported a dramatic increase in reports of severe beatings and murder-suicides in the home. The pandemic was not the only worldwide health phenomenon, so was domestic abuse. In the United Kingdom, for instance, they were 16 domestic abuse killings of women and children in a three-week period from late March to mid-April of last year. In the U.S., Canada, China, and Afghanistan calls to domestic abuse hotlines showed similar rises. Spain solve an 18% increase in calls to domestic violence hotlines, the French saw a 30% increase. When people “sheltered in place” the homes in

which they sought shelter became places of terror for thousands of women and children. The World Health Organization says that we've not only had a health epidemic, before the pandemic we have had "a global health problem of epidemic proportions." Domestic violence.

Each day, around the world 37 women are killed in instances of family violence. 50 American women are shot and killed every month by a spouse or partner. In the United States 20 people are assaulted every minute by someone they love. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African-American women. Homicide is the leading cause of mortality among pregnant women in New York, Chicago, and a number of cities. 54% of the mass shootings in the United States involve domestic violence.

In the United States, 2 trillion dollars is spent every year in medical costs for victims of domestic violence. Men are the perpetrators of 90% of all domestic violence incidents. Guns are involved in about half domestic violence cases. Guns are used in nearly 90% of all domestic violence related homicides.

The scourge of domestic violence has been studied for decades. Some speculate that there are certain factors in modern life that aggravate a problem that has been with us since the days of King David and young Bathsheba. Some psychologists speculate that some men, who as I have said, are the overwhelming perpetrators of domestic violence, feel dehumanized and humiliated by their work, or lack of it, or the economy, or the ways they are treated.

Note that Scripture doesn't speculate on the possible motives for David's sin against this young woman. There is no delving into possible psychological sources for what he did. Scripture just reports it as it happened – this famous man who had been designated by God to lead Israel has sunk to the level of committing the rape of this young woman. The sin is reported as the fact it is.

I expect that there are some of you who sometimes think to yourselves as you sit here on Sunday morning, "the church doesn't seem like it's dealing with real life." Or, "Church is where we go to drift off into some never Neverland of the spirit that is irrelevant to the world in which we live."

You sure can't think that this Sunday!

I am not going to speculate about why David committed this act and put himself and this woman in this situation. Perhaps it's enough for today just a note that even one so great as David, one who had found such favor in the eyes of the Lord, is capable of committing the sin of domestic abuse, the violence of a man against a woman, the abuse of the power less by the powerful.

But because this is Christ's church, let us say more. The church is not only a place where we come for comfort and consolation, the church is also a place where the truth is told and where justice is served. Let's tell the truth. We have a massive epidemic of domestic violence in our land. I have hit you with some of the numbers. And the numbers are deeply disturbing and overwhelming. But we must not be overwhelmed by the numbers. We must respond to the numbers of victims of domestic violence, the thousands of instances of this crime, as evidence of our sin, a tally of some of the ways we fall short of the glory of God, instances that show that we are indeed sinners who need saving.

And because we are Christians, Christ gives us responsibility for ministry to the victimized, the power less, the broken in the vulnerable. Christ has made us our sister's keeper. The church is designated to be a showcase for God's intentions in the world, a sign that Christ is determined to reign over all. Therefore, here are some of my hopes for the life of our church in the middle of an epidemic of domestic violence:

1. Christ Jesus enables us to tell the truth about ourselves and our world. We really do need saving. I want our congregation to be a haven of truth. Maybe the world wants to turn its back on the victims of domestic violence, lay the burden upon our law enforcement officials and tell them not to bother us with it. But the church doesn't need to do that. If you have been a victim of domestic violence or abuse, if you have observed this sin taking place in your family, or among your neighbors, I want you to come talk to me about it. I'm no great expert on the subject, but together we can prayerfully decide what Jesus wants us to do. Help is available in our community, experienced, caring people who can help victims escape from this, and can constrain perpetrators of this act. Hear me well: God wants no one to suffer silently with this sort of pain. What another is doing to you is not, never has been, God's will and they have no right to afflict you in this way.
2. As I mentioned, Christ makes each of us responsible for one another. I hope that you can say today that your marriage, your home, and all your relationships have been free of the threat of domestic violence and abuse. But your responsibility doesn't end with the boundaries of your family. Victims of domestic violence can feel terribly alone. They may think that they have no options, that no one can understand what they are going through and nobody cares. We can make a witness in this area.
3. We can be supportive of shelter homes, safe sanctuaries for women and children and older adults who are the major victims of violence in the home. We can also encourage and support our law enforcement officials who are often terribly burdened by the crimes that they see committed in homes that are kept from public view.
4. And we can pray. If you have responded to loved ones in ways that you wish you had not. If there are those whom you love but you do not know how to love them in the right way, please asked me for help. What you have done to women or children or vulnerable older adults is wrong and is against God's will. Please pray that you will respond to your better self, to the person whom Jesus wants you to become. Pray that you will be given the power to resist your sinful inclination to solve your problems, your anger, your feelings of inadequacy, through harming others. And all of us, put this epidemic of violence on your prayer list.

Some of you may have heard me quote before the great poet T.S. Eliot who wants ask the question, "Why should people of the church?" He responded, "Because the church tells us of sin, death, and other unpleasant facts of life."

I hope that church has been a source of truth-telling for you today. With this ancient story of King David's sin set before us by Scripture, I hope that we have not only managed to tell some truth about ourselves and our world, but we also have received a commission from Christ to do our part to respond to his will for the world' great need.