



Break the Silence:

The Central Ohio Faith Community
Responds to Family Violence

Christian

Christian women may have several messages that make them feel guilty for wanting to leave abusive situations. These messages include:

- It is your Christian duty to forgive
- The Christian woman must keep her family together
- Put your marriage in God's hands

Clergy should be sensitive to these messages and be willing to put them in perspective in order to promote safety and healing in families. You should be willing to discuss scriptures that have in the past been used to justify abuse. For example:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.
(Ephesians 5:22-23)

This passage is not intended to prescribe unquestioning obedience to the husband. Rather, it describes a model based on Christ's relationship to the church – based on sacrificial love and service, not intimidation and abuse.

Suggestions for Preaching About Family Violence

Be aware of the fact that possibly some form of family violence may impact a third of those who will be listening to your homily/sermon on a given Sunday. The scripture readings of almost every Sunday afford us the opportunity to speak about gospel values of love, respect, kindness, and gentleness to others, especially to those with whom we live. Just a simple and pastorally sound reference to family violence in a homily/sermon lets people know that it is okay to approach you about the matter for help.

Be sensitive to the many times that the assigned Sunday readings readily lend themselves to some application or reference to issues pertaining to family violence. The following are offered as some examples of such opportunities and a possible connection you might make in some part of your homily/sermon:

Scripture

Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21
(3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Summary and Suggestions

Luke presents Jesus returning to Nazareth where He had been reared. He enters the synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "the spirit of the Lord is upon me ... sent to bring glad tidings to the poor,

to proclaim liberty to captives... release to prisoners... to announce a year of favor." Jesus would desire to release individuals held captive by the fear and shame which results from abuse and violence. Would Jesus want a spouse or children to be held as prisoners in their own homes? How tragic that so many might be in need of liberty from acts of violence right in their own homes. What responsibility do we have to speak up and help bring such glad tidings to those in need?

Luke 7:36-8:3
(11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Luke presents, in the setting of a home, Jesus treating a woman known to be a sinner with great compassion and gentleness. He praises her great love, forgives her sins, and sends her away in peace. The passage ends with a reference to women who accompanied Jesus on his journeys and who assisted him out of their means. Why not use this passage, not only as an opportunity to reflect on our need to seek forgiveness from the Lord with a contrite heart, but also to illustrate the kindness, gentleness, appreciation and respect Jesus showed to women? Contrast the gentle approach of Jesus to the woman with that of Simon the Pharisee.

Mark 4:35-41
(12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

Mark tells the story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat during a bad storm. They wake the sleeping Jesus and ask him, "Teacher, doesn't it matter to you that we are going to drown?" Jesus rebukes the wind, calms the sea, and reminds them to have faith. The miracle story provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon the power and care of Jesus who can calm the storms and tribulations the church and its members' experience. The individuals who are victims of family violence often may feel abandoned by Jesus and the church while they struggle to survive in the midst of their situations. Preach about the power of Jesus to calm their storms and strengthen them to do what is necessary to achieve tranquility and peace in their lives.

Mark 7:1-8, 21-23
(22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

Jesus states that wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart and he identifies evils coming from within that render a man (sic) impure. Talk about how acts of fornication, murder, adulterous conduct, greed, maliciousness, deceit, sensuality, envy, and arrogance can exist in families today and the devastating toll they can have on individuals within the system.

Matthew 21:33-43
(27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Jesus tells the parable of the property owner who leased out his vineyard to tenant farmers. When vintage time arrives, he dispatches his slaves to the tenants to obtain his share of the grapes. The slaves, and eventually his son, are beaten, stoned or killed. Use this Sunday as an opportunity to discuss how the vineyard of God is still troubled or plagued by acts of violence, and how the tenants often still fail to provide the master with good

grapes at vintage time.

Mark 10:2-16
(27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

Mark presents Jesus discussing with the Pharisees whether it is permissible for a husband to divorce his wife, and Jesus describes the intentions of God at the beginning of creation. The reading from Genesis gives the story of the creation of woman from the rib of the man. Use this Sunday's readings as an opportunity to discuss the church's vision of marriage and what are some legitimate responses when a marriage falls short of that vision in significant ways.

Matthew 22:34-40
(30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

The lawyer attempts to trip Jesus up by asking the question, "Which commandment of the law is the greatest?" Jesus responds with laws of loving God and neighbor. The first reading describes the compassionate God who hears the cries of the poor, widow, aliens and orphans who are exploited by others. Use the readings to challenge your listeners to take a good look at who they may be harming in any way by their thoughts, words, or deeds.

Luke 3:10-18
(3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C)

The holiday season is a time of stress for many. In fact, research indicates that acts of family violence actually increase during this time of year, though we think of this season as being one of peace and tranquility. John the Baptist, in Luke's gospel tells the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers what each must do to prepare for the coming of the Lord. His advice is concrete and he challenges each to take a look at what in his life he needs to reform. Ask your listeners what the Lord would have each change in his or her own home and interactions with family members. Challenge them with specific examples regarding how to better speak to and treat one another as the holidays approach.

Matthew 1:18-24
(4th Sunday of Advent, Year A)

As above, the holiday season is a good time to draw attention to the issues relating to domestic violence. Matthew presents the story of how Joseph, guided by the words of an angel in a dream, receives Mary into his home as wife. The virgin is with child and he will be named "Emmanuel," a name which means "God is with us." Preach about family and the need to work at making God present within the family in special ways during the holiday season.

Be aware of the fact that a misinterpretation or a partial interpretation of readings on some Sundays of the church year can be problematic for victims of family violence. The following are some examples of such readings:

Scripture

Summary & Suggestions

Matthew 5:38-48
(7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Matthew presents Jesus urging his disciples to offer no resistance to injury, and Jesus states, "when a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other ... love your enemies, pray for your persecutors." The reading from Leviticus calls for not bearing hatred for your brother in your heart, and take no revenge and cherish no grudge. When preaching about Jesus' command to love, to forgive, to be non-violent, etc., be sensitive to how your words and the interpretation of these passages will sound to the people in your congregation who are or have been abused by a spouse or parent. Offer guidance on how to respond to the acts of violence and when and how to forgive.

Luke 6:27-38
(7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Year C gives the Lukan parallel to the Matthean text mentioned above. Be sensitive to the same issues

Matthew 18:21-35
(24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Peter asks the Lord, "how often must I forgive?" and Jesus responds, "seventy times seven times." The reading from Sirach states that "wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." Our words about the need to forgive are often difficult to hear for the person who has been seriously hurt by another, especially a member of his or her own family. Perhaps what we need to preach regarding these and similar texts is how forgiveness is a process that takes time, and how the Christian is challenged by Christ not to "hug too tightly, cherish, or nourish anger and hate." There is a great difference between being legitimately angry and cherishing or nourishing that anger.

Written by Rev. Thomas Johns for the Domestic Violence Awareness Project, Diocese of Cleveland, c/o Women in Church and Society, 1031 Superior Ave., Cleveland, OH 44114, reprinted with permission.