

WEEK 1: Afraid to speak, afraid to listen

EASTER 5

Acts 8.26-40; Psalm 22.26-32; 1 John 4.7-21; John 15.1-8



Figure 1: "One million stars to end violence"

PRAYER FOR DFV PREVENTION MONTH

God who brings new shoots from old stumps
flesh and breath from dry bones
and goodness from chaos:
we pray for members of our community
whose lives are limited by the effects of family violence and abuse.
Make us people of deep listening, of courageous conflict
and commitment to the ways of healing and reconciliation,
that our communities might be places
where love and peace prevail
and even the least of us belong.
We pray this through Jesus who journeyed through death to life
that we might do the same. Amen.

STORY TELLING - ANGELA'S STORY

She told other people first.

The abuse had happened a long time ago, but recent events had brought it to light again, and this time she felt ready to begin reaching out for help. But who was she going to tell? Who would believe her? Who would help?

She told a professional person. That was ok; they believed her. But it didn't change things, because they were too far away. They weren't related. They didn't come to family gatherings. They couldn't help.

So she told her friend, Jan. That's where things started to get murky and painful. Jan knew him, too. Jan had kids. She thought Jan might say something that would change things, but Jan said nothing. Jan still went to the family gatherings. Jan said it was too hard, and she didn't know what to do. Maybe there was not a lot Jan *could* do.

What had Angela hoped for? That Jan would tell her partner? Immediately cease all contact with the perpetrator? It felt too hard to cut them off without an explanation. Jan said she believed Angela, but let the situation unfold naturally. It didn't go anywhere. Just a niggling in the back of the head. The elephant in the room.

Some time passed. Life went on. Some people breathed a little easier.

A few years later, Angela reached out again, this time with more information. This time she had even been brave enough to confront the perpetrator.

A revelation like that sends shockwaves through a family. It changes the way everyone looks at each other. There is denial ("it didn't happen like that;" "I didn't see it, so it can't be true"). There is

defensiveness (“your accusation really hurt this person). There is blame.

[The Reverend Ann Tiemeyer said](#), “The amount of pain you hear always trumps for me whether someone would be making this up.” That’s what it was like for Jan. On top of the heartbreak she felt hearing Angela’s story, what hurt the most was hearing other people say of her, “Yes, but with her history of mental health issues, we can’t really trust that what she says is true.” Another one said, “Well, I believe her, but I’m not going to let that stand in the way of my relationship with the perpetrator.” In other words, nobody really believed her.

Not enough, anyway.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

What stands out to you from these stories? Did any new idea or images emerge? What responses do you notice in yourself as you read or hear the story and reflection?

READING THE SCRIPTURES

1 JOHN 4.7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

REFLECTION

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

The stars in the image at the beginning of this study are from a project called “[One Billion Stars](#)” (formerly “One Million Stars to End Violence”), an international weaving project created by Maryann Talia Pau. The stars are symbols of peace and hope. As Pau describes it: “The One Billion Stars project is an opportunity for us to bring light and hope in the world and to make something beautiful and powerful together. We know that domestic violence, violence on our streets, racism and harassment is happening RIGHT NOW and often it is difficult to know what to do to help those who are suffering and to help prevent it...The One Billion Stars project is an opportunity to remind each other that we CAN do something about it and not feel paralysed by all that is broken with humanity.”

Jesus said, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3.19-21).

Domestic and family violence is incredibly uncomfortable to talk about. We like to tell ourselves it’s a private matter, or we are afraid of doing the wrong thing, or of getting caught in the middle. As humans, we are often reluctant to change. However, it is darkness that allows evil acts to grow. [Sarah Wendt](#) writes, “It is through fear that men are able to control women’s behaviour, movements and freedom. And it is through fear that we look past suspected domestic violence. It is more comfortable to think ‘he can’t be that bad’, ‘she must have done something to provoke him’, or ‘they will sort it out’. The alternative is too frightening for us because intimate relationships are the most significant social context in a person’s life.” Denial and lack of engagement only add to the darkness and fear. The more we try to distance ourselves from a situation, the more complicit we actually become.

I believe you, but...

- ...you have a history of mental health issues that make me question your credibility
- ...the person you have accused is so nice/respectable/powerful
- ...it’s not my place to interfere
- ...I don’t know what to do
- ...I don’t want to make it worse
- ...I’m not afraid of him, why should you be?

I believe you, but I don’t want to change my behaviour. My comfort is more important than your safety.

“As concerned friends, it is extremely hard to break this wall of silence that has been built from coercive control. The first thing we can do is to believe any disclosure of abuse, not judge and explore it sensitively so we do not reinforce messages of silence and privacy.” (Wendt) Believe them, and take their fears seriously, no matter what you think of the person/people who hurt them. “It’s not enough to say, “I hear you, that’s really too bad.” It’s important to say, “I believe you and it should have never happened to you. It was wrong what the person did to you.” That is the beginning of healing.” —[The Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune.](#)

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr once said: *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”* With each star, a little more light shines in the world. In the same way, every time we open our ears to hear someone’s story, we let a little light into the world. Every time we open our mouths to condemn the abuse and support the abused, we let a little more light into the world

“When someone comes forth with their story, they are giving you a precious, fragile gift. And you need to affirm that you believe—that you hear their pain. The amount of pain you hear always trumps for me whether someone would be making this up.” —[The Rev. Ann Tiemeyer](#)

When we feel that getting involved -- engaging with the conversation about domestic violence or standing with someone who has entrusted us with their pain -- is too hard or too messy, we need to remind ourselves that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him (1 Jn 4.9) In other words, “God has entered the messiness and violence of human life and transformed it, through the Cross and Resurrection. Our God *did* get involved, Jesus *did* ‘make a fool of himself’ and miraculously the world is transformed and redeemed.” ([Lucy D’Aeth](#)) In this is love.

Discussion questions

1. Have you ever been trusted with someone's story about abuse? Without betraying any confidences, can you share something about that?
2. If you know both parties involved, and one is claiming abuse, where does your loyalty lie?
3. What fears hold us back from talking about domestic violence in our churches? What actions can we take to move from fear to love?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Susan Glaspell, *A Jury of Her Peers*, 1916.

<https://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/a-jury-of-her-peers>

"A Jury of Her Peers" is a short story about women living in a rural, highly patriarchal society and the difficulties they faced; loneliness, repression, and domestic abuse. Two women – Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters – are able to discern through subtle domestic signs that their neighbour, Minnie, was being abused by her husband

- "you mustn't reproach yourself," counselled Mrs. Peters. "Somehow, we just don't see how it is with other folks till – something comes up."
- "Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while!" she cried. "That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?"

Sarah Wendt, "Why don't we speak up when we see signs of domestic violence?" [The Conversation](#), October 1, 2014

[One Billion Stars Project](#): Weaving Stars for Violence Free Communities

[How to support someone experiencing domestic and family violence.](http://1800respect.org.au)
1800respect.org.au

CLOSING PRAYER

We come to you, God,
Father, Brother,
Mother, Sister,
Friend:

We are weary, weary of heart.
The task is huge.

You taught us -
When one suffers, we all suffer.
How can we turn our faces?
How can we now turn our backs?
We look for a way forward.
Our eyes have been opened to see.
Our ears have heard.
We have become aware.
We have woken from ignorance.

Open a path for justice,
for healing,
for sharing,
for peace.
May we walk the path. Amen.

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