

Week 2: The Bystander Effect

Easter 6

Acts 10.44-48; Ps 98; 1 John 5.1-12; John 15.9-17



Figure 1: <http://junelee.kr/portfolio/bystander/>

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:

The [bystander effect](#) is a term coined after the murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964. She was raped and murdered by stabbing in two attacks by the same man on the property of units where she lived. The following day the New York Times reported that there were 38 people who knew the attack was taking place and did nothing to stop it. Decades later this number was revised to two or three people: one who called out during the first attack resulting in the attacker running away only to come back again and another man who was known to the victim and was reported to say to police, “I didn’t want to get involved.”

It is especially difficult with domestic and family violence, in which people are often suffering in private, to recognise when we are bystanders. But sometimes we know more than we think we do. Below is an excerpt of a personal story from an anonymous contributor to the [Allison Baden-Clay Foundation](#). After about 15 years of abusive marriage, it took the unexpected death of her brother and the way her husband handled it to realise she needed to leave – it still took another four years to do so... Listen as she speaks of a particular altercation:

“My youngest brother passed away. Very suddenly, very unexpectedly. I will never forget that early morning phone call from my father... the confusion, the pain, the shock. I was pregnant at the time. I raced around to my parents’ house. I needed to be with them. My family flew, drove and raced from all corners to come together. A lot is a blur. I couldn’t talk without breaking down. We huddled together for a few days and did all the things that needed to be done. Everyone stayed at Mum and Dads. Sleeping over in their old rooms, all together. Except me. I wasn’t allowed to stay. The closeness of my family always upset [my husband]. So, late one

afternoon when we arrived back to our own home, he let me have it. I was being selfish. I wasn't thinking about him and how all of this made him feel. I was making it all about me and leaving him out. I sat at the kitchen bench with tears rolling down my face as he screamed and yelled and threw things at me. I'm sure the neighbours heard. It wouldn't have been the first time, but no one ever came to see if I was okay. No one ever called the police. No one asked when they saw me in the front yard if I needed help. Instead, I felt embarrassed, ashamed and worthless."

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

John 15.9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

REFLECTION

“I didn’t want to get involved.” How deeply can you feel that? For me it is visceral. It feels like stepping over a boundary into unknown territory, and that is frightening. There are many reasons we may not want to directly involve ourselves in a conflict, personal safety is high on that list. In our gospel today, Jesus gives us a new commandment, “to love one another as I have loved you” (v. 12). It leads me to wonder in what way it is loving not to get involved.

There is a growing body of people saying that there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. To stand by and do nothing, say nothing, is to align ourselves with the perpetrator of violence. It is easy to be overwhelmed by all the ways we haven’t acted before today, and it’s easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of need. However, there are many [resources](#) now available to help empower us.

When love is spoken of in the gospels, it is most often expressed as action, rather than emotion. Jesus says there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (v. 13). Jesus’ embodiment was the embodiment of love, Jesus’ actions on Earth are the embodiment of love.

We have the perfect example regarding love and bystanders in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). We know it well: when the Jewish man is attacked, two prominent Jews, a priest and a Levite, walk past him and leave him to die; just as his attackers did. We understand that there are reasons of ritual purity that would mean all Jews would expect they acted in the way they did. We have many reasons for our own inaction.

It is the action of the Samaritan which shows love, despite being the one whose experience of generations of hatred and violence would

provide more reason to leave a Jew lying on the side of the road than that of a priest or a Levite. He could have chosen to continue the violence in his inaction, in choosing to pass the Jew by. In remaining an “innocent” bystander. Instead, he chooses love. He chooses to act, even though he knew it put him in a vulnerable position.

Love makes us vulnerable. That is the truth. Both emotions of love and actions of love, create vulnerability in us. This means we can be hurt more easily, and we experience the most rewarding relationships because it allows for deep connection.

Kitty’s story, whilst exaggerated at the time, sparked research into what effect being attacked in the presence of others has, if any. Researchers have found over the decades since, two sides to the bystander effect. Firstly, the notion of dispersed responsibility. If we see an attack taking place and there are others around, we hesitate to act, instead checking how others are responding to know whether it is right to intervene. The flip side is that it takes only one person to speak up and the response cascades; others are empowered to join in and work to help the victim.

By simply becoming aware to the signs of DfV beyond the outwardly visible (bruises and broken bones), we can begin to see opportunities to show people (both victims and perpetrators) love. By creating safe spaces and listening non-judgementally when we check in with our friends and neighbours about how they are coping, or lovingly enquire about warning signs that they are heading down an abusive path, we can allow them opportunity to express themselves and what their needs are. We can encourage them to seek the help needed. And then, we can stay involved. Continue to check in. Remain an ally to the victims. Remain present to perpetrators, continuing to encourage them to access programs designed to help.

We do none of this on our own. Apart from the many resources that are out there to help us now, let us not forget the most powerful supplier of love, the Holy Spirit. In the reading from Acts today, the Holy Spirit has fallen on all who were present; they were all empowered!

We, gathered today, are (likely) Christians. As such, we are not only commanded to love one another, but empowered by the Holy Spirit to do just that. We can draw strength from the Spirit and from each other and stand by one another in courageous love.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have I not wanted to get involved? What did this feel like?
2. How does love play an **active** role in my life? What abundance grows in these spaces?
3. What might a safe space look like where I can have conversations with people I am concerned about?

A Helping Hand

Sometimes, we close our eyes,
Pretending to be a normal bystander.
But someday, and somewhere,
Let us reach our hands out to others.
No matter what comes along.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

Signs and tips for helping people experiencing DFV:

- [Talking to someone about their DV situation](#)
- [Questions to ask](#)
- [Bystander Effect and Domestic Violence](#)

[Mensline](#) (Talking to people about their violence)

Public harassment bystander intervention tips:

- [National Sexual Violence Resource Centre](#)
- [Queensland Human Rights Commission](#)

CLOSING PRAYERS (*From the Anglican Church of Australia's [White Ribbon Day resources](#)*)

God bless us with insight
to recognise violence in all its forms,
and courage to name it,
speaking out for justice. **Amen.**

The Lord Jesus bless us
with compassion for the vulnerable,
and grace to stand with them,
sharing his strength. **Amen.**

The Holy Spirit bless us
with a prayerful heart,
and power to breathe peace,
transforming the world. **Amen.**

The blessing of the holy and glorious Trinity,
eternal Wisdom, living Word, abiding Spirit,
be amongst us and remain with us always. **Amen.**