

WHAT IS HEALTHY LOVE?

I Corinthians 13

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10 February 2019

One of the most important lessons I've ever learned in ministry came to me, fortunately, very early on. Some of you have heard me tell the story of being the first woman minister ever in the city of Waco, Texas. I was the associate minister of a congregation there for two years, and then - for various reasons - I left that position to become the Education Coordinator of the Waco Rape Crisis Center. There was an overlap period of time - about two or three weeks — between the announcement that I was leaving the church for this new position and the time I actually left. In that period of time, at least three women approached me and each told me her story of sexual violence. I was stunned. I wasn't stunned that three women had been victims of sexual violence. I already knew those sad statistics. What truly shocked me into a lesson I've never forgotten is the fact that these women did not talk to me about this part of their lives until it was stated publicly that I was going to be working for the rape crisis center. When I was one of their pastors, they hadn't shared these stories with me. But once I announced my new job, the message they received was, "Oh, OK, now it's safe to talk to her about this part of my life."

Why should the church talk about issues like domestic violence and sexual abuse? Why do we have to mention words like homophobia, racism, anti-semitism and bullying in worship? Why do we bring up unpleasant topics in liturgy, prayers and sermons — words like suicide, divorce, and bankruptcy? This is why. Because if we don't say the words explicitly, people will not feel safe discussing those aspects of their lives in church. If we don't talk about mental illness, then many of those living with mental illness and their fami-

ly members and friends continue to sit in shame and silence. Words need to be spoken before healing can begin. If a light does not shine on the stories of our lives, no growth can occur.

And we want our congregation to be a safe place, a place where the good news is spoken to people in all circumstances, a place where the soil is carefully cultivated so that healing and growth can occur.

Victims of domestic violence come from all walks of life, all cultures, all income groups, all ages, all religions. 95% of domestic violence victims are women.

Here are a few more statistics -

One in five women is sexually assaulted in college. In addition, one in five female high school students reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner. Women aged 16-24 are by far the most vulnerable.

Understanding the cycle of violence and interrupting it is critically important. More than half of men who batter their wives or partners will also beat their children. And if male children experience domestic violence they are 1,000 times more likely to repeat violence.

So you can see that staying silent is not helpful to anyone, now or in the future.

Last fall, during our addiction awareness Sunday we talked about the issue of stigma. Stigma is a pertinent issue for our topic today as well. One of the reasons that so much domestic violence goes unreported, and then, logically, proliferates, is that victims feel ashamed. They are sometimes afraid, of course...afraid for their lives, afraid for their children's lives, afraid of how they will financially survive, but they are also afraid of what people will think. They are afraid of the questions, like, "Why did you stay?"

This is Leslie Morgan Steiner. She doesn't look like the kind of woman who would be abused, does she? Without the photo, just reading her bio, you wouldn't pick her for a victim, either. When she was 22, she graduated from Harvard College, moved to New York City and got a job at Seventeen magazine. She fell in love with her first husband, and fell into the trap of domestic violence. Her husband seduced her, charmed her, then isolated her. Then he beat her and threatened to kill her. Why did she stay? She answers the question this way: "The answer is easy. I didn't know he was abusing me. Even though he held those loaded guns to my head, pushed me down stairs, threatened to kill our dog, pulled the key out of the car ignition as I drove down the highway, poured coffee grinds on my head as I dressed for a job interview, I never once thought of myself as a battered wife. Instead, I was a very strong woman in love with a deeply troubled man, and I was the only person on Earth who could help Conor face his demons." Leslie didn't have the words for what was happening to her, and instinctively, intuitively, she probably knew how dangerous it would have been to try to leave. This is how she describes it:

"To me, this is the saddest and most painful question that people ask, because we victims know something you usually don't: It's incredibly dangerous to leave an abuser. Because the final step in the domestic violence pattern is kill her. Over 70 percent of domestic violence murders happen after the victim has ended the relationship, after she's gotten out, because then the abuser has nothing left to lose. Other outcomes include long-term stalking, even after the abuser remarries; denial of financial resources; and manipulation of the family court system to terrify the victim and her children, who are sometimes forced by family court judges to spend unsupervised time with the man who beat their mother."

People who abuse are skilled at manipulating their victims. It doesn't matter how smart or sophisticated you are, if you fall into the trap, it's very hard to claw your way out. Once someone finds her way to freedom, the best thing the rest of us can do is offer our unconditional support. The worst thing we can do is question the decisions she made along the way.

Shame and stigma keep people from feeling the grace of God that is offered to all of us.

Another reason that churches need to talk about domestic violence is because churches have contributed to the problem. Not our particular congregation, I hope and pray. But the Christian church in general, along with other religious institutions. We all know that there are churches where abuse has taken place, and covered up, and where victims have been doubted and not offered help and support. Other churches have given women harmful messages, based on horrible misreadings of scripture, saying to them things like, "Wives must be submissive to their husbands" and "divorce is never justified." When I started work at the rape crisis center, one of the first women I met was extremely bitter and angry at God. I finally found out why. After her sexual assault, the first place she went was her church. And the first words out of her pastor's mouth, the very first words were, "Honey, you need to forgive him." Now some victims move to a place of forgiveness, but that sure isn't where you start. She felt as if her experience had been completely minimized and it left her hurt and furious, not only with her pastor, but with God. So it is imperative that churches now speak up and say, unequivocally, that we are places where our stories can be heard and where God's healing presence is offered.

We are called to offer unconditional love and grace, and to help end the cycle of abuse and violence.

Our scripture reading for today is one you've probably heard hundreds of times, mostly at weddings and funerals. I can't even begin to imagine how many times I've read it myself. I'm not always the biggest fan of Paul, but there are gems in his writings, and this is one of them..."Love is patient and kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." I have read these words so many times that they have become a mental check-list for me. Please know - I'm not saying I live this perfectly, not by any means, but I've found it so useful to think about these practical behaviors and check myself against them. If I'm feeling irritable with my spouse, then I'm not acting in love.

It's one thing to say to someone, "I love you." But putting those words into action - well, that's a different matter, isn't it? Love is what we do. Love is when our actions match our words. When I find myself feeling irritable now, I stop and pay attention. What is making me irritable? Am I tired? Am I stressed? Do I need a nap or yoga? Should I take a day off or go to the gym? Is there a problem in my life that I'm sweeping under the rug? Because what Paul reminds me is that irritability and love can't co-exist. Not for long, anyway. Constant irritability will begin to erode love. As will envy or arrogance or rudeness. Or insisting on one's own way.

How can we, as people of this good word, help to encourage healthy relationships? As I was researching this sermon, I contacted Nate and told him that we need to be offering some relationship awareness programming to our senior high youth, educating them

so they'll know that fear and love do not ever go together, that when someone tries to exert power and control over you, that is a red flag. We want them to know that their stories and experiences matter, that we will always listen to them.

Healthy love is love that brings out the best in another person. Healthy love is love that sees the other's good qualities and encourages their flourishing. In a healthy relationship, there is safety of every kind. Physical safety, to be sure. But also emotional safety, the ability for each person to express feelings honestly without fear.

I John 4:18 says this: <https://goo.gl/images/FejoKj>. "There is no fear in love; rather, perfect love casts out all fear." Fear and love cannot coexist. There is either one or the other in your home, in your relationships. If you are constantly walking on eggshells, nervous about the eruption of someone's anger, that's living in fear. If you find yourself keeping silent instead of speaking your truth, if you feel as if you cannot express yourself or do the things that would fulfill you, you are probably living in fear rather than love.

Let me say it explicitly here. This church wants to be a safe place. If you want to talk about finding your way towards a more healthy relationship or if you want help healing past wounds, we can help you find the right resources.

None of us ever knows what goes on in someone else's relationship, but if you ever suspect that someone you know might be in an abusive situation, find a way to say the words to let that person know that you are a safe, non-judgmental listening ear. You just might save a life.

What God wants for all of us is wholeness, wellness, fullness of life — to know in one another the unconditional love, acceptance, forgiveness and grace that is love at its best.