

Because October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, I would like to focus on Family Violence this morning. Before I begin, I need to make a couple disclaimers. First is that the statistics I will give you hold for both heterosexual and homosexual couples. Second, I would like to acknowledge that both women and men are victims of family violence. I have tried to keep my sermon gender neutral. When I was unable to do this, I refer to the offender as “he” and the victim as “she” for the unfortunate fact that 85% of domestic violence victims are women. My goal is awareness and education. If I offend anyone, I do apologize.

Now family violence is a painful subject, and you may rightly ask if it is appropriate for me to preach about it. I’m doing this because family violence is a hidden thing. It thrives on secrecy, and so we must acknowledge in a very public way that it exists. We can’t solve a problem until we name it. But aren’t there agencies whose purpose is to deal with family violence? What about Domestic Violence Services of Lancaster County, the YWCA, and the PA Coalition Against Domestic Violence? Let them talk about it. Why should the church become involved?

Why should the church become involved? Because a woman is beaten in her home every nine seconds. Because the number one cause of birth defects and infant mortality is battering during pregnancy (Branson & Silva, *Violence Among Us*, p 5). Because 31% of women experience physical violence in their marriage (Branson 2). Because one out of 4 women in each church community is or has been abused by her partner (Branson 1). Look around you. This isn’t an issue that happens just to other people out there. Family violence occurs in all neighborhoods, rich and poor, to people of any and every class, socioeconomic status, gender, race, or age. This has happened, could be happening to people sitting here this morning. Not only that, but it affects our family members, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers. I bet that everyone here knows of someone who has been affected by family violence. Family violence affects every one of us.

So let’s talk about it. I’m sure you’ve all heard the term domestic violence. It’s been defined as “violence done in the home between two people that are legally married or have an intimate relationship” (Soto, lecture, 5/). But this violence doesn’t happen in a vacuum. If there are children in the home, it affects them. If they are grandparents in the home, it affects them. If they are pets in the home, it affects them. Domestic violence affects everyone living in that home, so we use the term “family violence” to indicate this broader understanding.

We also need to broaden our understanding of the term “violence.” When we hear that word, we think of one person doing physical harm to another person—shooting, stabbing, punching. But there are other forms of violence as well. There’s emotional violence where the offender denies or belittles the victim’s feelings and experiences. There’s verbal violence—intimidation and ridicule. There is sexual violence, which includes denying a woman the right to make decisions about birth control. There’s social violence, when the offender controls the victim’s access to friends and family. There’s economic violence, when the offender controls the victim’s access to money. There’s also spiritual violence, when the offender keeps the victim from practicing his or her faith. It also includes taking bible verses out of context in order to keep victims in submission. We read “Wives submit to your husbands” (Ephesians 5:22) and “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:12). How are we to understand these texts? There’s even our reading from Second Timothy this morning. A perpetrator could justify abusing his victim by claiming that she must “suffer for the gospel.”

So what are we to do? There are two main ways to confront family violence. There’s intervention, helping a family that is caught in an abusive situation. But there’s also prevention, which is what I want to

focus on this morning. Why is that? Because family violence is preventable, and prevention is something each one of us can do.

Prevention starts with education. It means rethinking our concept of gender roles. A man does not get his worth from being macho and controlling his wife and children. A man's worth comes from being a child of God. A woman does not get her worth by being pretty and having a man love her. She gets her worth because God loves her. We need to learn that it's OK for men to be vulnerable and show their emotions. We need to value women who are smart and outspoken. Imagine a world where it's socially acceptable for boys to grow up to be nurses, elementary school teachers and fashion designers and for girls to grow up to be scientists, engineers and politicians, even president of the United States.

We also prevent family violence by questioning our patriarchal society. Even our religion is a patriarchal religion. What is patriarchy? It's "a form of social organization in which the father is the supreme authority in the family; [it's] a society, community or country based on this social organization" (Websters). In a patriarchal society, women and girls are seen as and treated as lesser than, second-class. But God created men and women to be equal. So truth comes from listening to both men's and women's voices. Wisdom comes from valuing what both genders have to offer. Men are not better than women, and women are not better than men. Both are to be valued for their unique gifts. Both men and women should have an equal voice in their families and in the church.

So we work for a world where all this is possible, and it starts by making our homes and churches places of safety and peace. We teach our children how to express all their emotions appropriately. This includes anger and fear. We teach our children how to solve their conflicts in a peaceful manner. And we must do these things ourselves, for children learn by example.

We must also confront the violence that lives inside of us. Make no mistake; it is there, and not because of original sin or because we have a "violent gene." No, but we do live in a violent society. You know that. All you have to do is read the paper or watch the news on TV. How many shootings and stabbings have there been in Lancaster this past year? But it's not just the news; think of the violence that's in our favorite TV shows and movies, the music on the radio, the video games we or our children play.

We live in a violent society. Like Habakkuk, we can say, "Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails" (1:3). What do we do when violence surrounds us? The Lord tells Habakkuk, "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it" (2:2). In other words, we are called to be modern-day prophets, to speak up and speak out against family violence, against violence of all kinds. I think of the judge in Montana who sentenced a high school teacher 15 years for raping a 14 year old girl and then suspended all but one month of jail time. He also made comments sympathizing with the perpetrator and blaming the victim. Because of the intense public outcry, the perpetrator's sentence is under appeal, and a formal complaint has been lodged seeking the judge's removal.

And what do we do when we are confronted with violence, when we ourselves become violent? We acknowledge that violence is a learned behavior, and anything that is learned can be unlearned. And we start with ourselves. We must do the courageous thing and admit how we have contributed to the violence that surrounds us. Then we must change our own behavior. It is hard work, but we can by committing our way to the Lord. "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7). So rather than choosing violence, we choose peace. Like Jesus, we counter violence with non-violence, with the power of love, God's love.

God tells us that "there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie" (Hab 2:3). Part of the vision that God speaks of is that our homes be places of flourishing and harmony, where spouses and partners take delight in each other and treat each other with love and mutual regard. In other

words, we need to love each other the way God loves us. Then that love flows outward to include our children, our neighbors, and all of creation. That's a vision worth working toward and waiting for.

Amen.