

Violent Death in the Community of Faith

Early in my ministry, when I served as associate pastor in a small Minnesota town, the husband of a church member murdered their two children and then took his own life. At work when it happened, Rachel discovered the scene upon her return from her second shift job. Following the memorial service for her family, she moved back to the West Coast to be with her family. I have never learned what happened to her.

My colleague Tom provided intense and competent pastoral care both to Rachel and our congregation. I facilitated a grief support group for Rachel's neighbors. Eventually, things got back to normal – or new normal. Once a congregation has been touched by such a catastrophic event, things are never quite the same.

The juxtaposition of the words “violent death” and “community of faith” are startling and discordant. While we understand that bad things indeed happen to good people, the loss of a church member or friend to murder at the hand of a family member or close acquaintance is not something we anticipate. People who come to church don't kill each other.

But, sometimes they do. Even this organization, the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA) has been touched by such a death. In 2005, the former moderator of our Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC) network was murdered by her spouse, who then took his own life; see: <http://archive.wfn.org/2005/06/msg00038.html> and <http://archive.wfn.org/2005/06/msg00037.html>. As the Presbyterian News Service said, “shock waves” went through the church and the community. But, as is often the case, there had been warning signs along the way.

Before beginning this year's project, PHEWA's Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence (PADVN) team sent out an e-survey to more than 800 PHEWA members and friends. Of those who responded, 10% reported that their church had lost either a member or relative of a member to domestic violence. All of these respondents, as well as those with no experience in this area, indicated the need for worship resources.

These responses resonated with my own experience. Despite our experience, faith, and seminary training; despite Tom's thirty years of ministry and my ten, nothing could have prepared us for this crisis. It would have been helpful, however, to be able to access resources to assist us as we made our way through such unfamiliar territory.

The resources provided by PADVN in this year's packet represent a beginning effort to develop a body of material that will be helpful to any person of faith who finds themselves on this journey. Original worship material, personal reflections, study aids and previously published work are included.

It is the intention of the PADVN leadership team to continue both to develop new worship responses and make available material that already exists. These new resources will be added to the online version of this packet which will be continually updated. Users of this packet are encouraged to check the site frequently as well as submit their own material to Susan Stack (Susan.Stack@pcusa.org) for consideration. Please include permission to publish if you are the author and full attribution if you are not.

One Pastor's Response to Tragedy

Part I: What Happened

On May 2, 2012 in the Phoenix suburb of Gilbert, Arizona, five members of the same family, including Lisa, age 47, her daughters Amber, 23, and Brittany, 19, Amber's daughter Lily, 15 months, and Amber's fiancé, Jimmy, huddled together behind locked doors. They were hiding from Lisa's ex-boyfriend, J.T. Ready, an individual who was well known locally because of his out-spoken anti-immigrant views and links with neo-Nazi organizations. Mr. Ready also had a history of abusive behavior towards Lisa and threats to Amber's fiancé. Suddenly the family heard a loud noise as a truck crashed into their garage. Within minutes, four of these five individuals were dead. Brittany had managed to hide under a bed in the back room before the shooting started.

Across the nation in the mountains of Western North Carolina, Lisa's parents received the phone call that every parent dreads. The details they heard exceeded their worst nightmares.

"Mr. Holmquist, I am sorry to tell you that Lisa, Amber, her fiancé and Lily have all been killed by Lisa's former boyfriend in a domestic homicide. He then took his own life. Brittany is safe and unharmed but badly shaken by this event."

For Rolf and Diane Holmquist, members of the Burnsville, North Carolina, First Presbyterian Church community, a huge part of life, as they had known it, ended. The days ahead were filled with planning and memorial services in Arizona and in North Carolina. At Burnsville Presbyterian Church, members who had known and loved Rolf and Diane for years, as well as other residents of that small mountain town, came together to grieve with them.

As a minister member of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, I was notified along with all of the pastors about this grievous event. In my capacity as co-chair of the Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network (PADVN), a network of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA), I contacted the Holmquists to offer our assistance to them. Ten days later I met them face to face. Their own pastor, Interim Bill Lindemann, was providing effective pastoral care but Rolf, a visual artist in his early seventies, wanted more than pastoral care. He wanted to redirect his life efforts to effectively addressing the problem of domestic violence and welcomed the opportunity to talk with me.

"Kevin," he said, "God is calling me to service as a result of this terrible tragedy."

After further conversation with them, it became evident that the Holmquists and their congregation would need additional help in absorbing this horrific tragedy. It was decided that I would come to First Presbyterian in Burnsville for an evening presentation on Domestic Violence. This would be followed by a worship service in the sanctuary to include the larger community.

The afternoon of the presentation and worship service, I arrived at the Holmquist home and met with Rolf and Diane, Bill Lindemann, and Joe Bennett, a Presbyterian hospice chaplain and family friend. We discussed the plans for the upcoming evening and listened as Rolf and Diane reflected further on the tragedy that had devastated their lives. After an hour and a half we headed to the church.

It was then that I really noticed the full beauty of their natural surroundings; their home is nestled in a mountain cove with the mountain's profile looming in the background. Rolf observed that it had provided a healing peace to them. And then as I followed their car to the church, I noticed the powerful message on the back window of their blue jeep. It was a large window decal of a red filigreed cross with the words, 'In Loving Memory' and underneath, the names of the four victims, each birth date listed separately, but with a shared date of death: May 2, 2012.

Generally speaking, I have never cared for this type of memorial tribute, but in this case I was struck by the magnitude of seeing all four names with the same date of death. I was also impressed by the brave witness of this retired couple, breaking the silence against Domestic Violence whenever they drive, thinking that it will always serve as a painful reminder to them of their loss. And then I realized that while the reminder is there for the world to see, that reality is already deeply seared onto their hearts and will be present with the Holmquists in every breath they breathe until their dying day.

The Rev. Dr. Kevin Frederick

One Pastor's Response to Tragedy

Part II: Education

After presenting general information (<http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/learn-the-basics/dv-faq>) about domestic violence to the group that had gathered at Burnsville Presbyterian Church the evening of the memorial service, I opened a time for questions and answers. Someone asked, "What do you recommend that we do as a church?" My answer was straightforward.

1. Educate yourselves about the issues surrounding domestic violence. (<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/presbyterians-against-domestic-violence/>) Get domestic violence resources for congregations (<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/domestic-violence-basics/>) What are the laws of the state? Are they adequate in providing protection to victims and prosecution of perpetrators? How do local law enforcement officers respond to domestic violence calls? Are there shelters and do they provide enough beds for protection of victims? What are the unmet needs of victims and shelters and how might the church work to meet those needs?
2. Surround Rolf and Diane with your love and prayers. Stay connected with them in the days ahead. Support is even more important after everyone has gone home and this is no longer in the news. As you educate yourselves about domestic violence, make sure that you communicate with the rest of the congregation what you are learning. Continue to pray that God's Holy Spirit will open you up as a congregation to become a catalyst in the local community and the presbytery in developing effective ways of addressing domestic violence.
3. Continue to break the code of silence that is so prevalent in churches today. Speak out about it in corporate worship as you pray and as you preach and raise the issue in the broader community. (<http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/phewa/pdfs/domestic-violence-pastortools.pdf>)

**ONE PASTOR'S RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY,
PART III: A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE AND HEALING**

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *from Psalm 55*

Leader: Give ear to my prayer, O God. Do not hide yourself from my supplication.

People: Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint. I am distraught by the noise of my enemy because of the clamor of the wicked.

Leader: My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

People: Fear and trembling have come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

Leader: It is not my enemies that taunt me—I could bear that; it is not my adversaries who deal insolently with me—I could hide from them.

People: But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng.

*** OPENING HYMN** *There Is a Balm in Gilead* *Hymn 394*

*** CALL TO CONFESSION**

*** PRAYER OF CONFESSION (unison)**

Holy God of Justice and Mercy, from the time we are very young children in our society, we are taught to respect and embody the authorities of power and force. We acknowledge these forms of strength can be both positive and negative within the international arena, but we confess that we know that when power and force define the way we relate within the interpersonal arenas of our lives, they damage and destroy relationships and life itself. We confess, Lord, and acknowledge that control destroys relationships and people.

Teach us to enact your wisdom and your grace in our relationships. Teach us that it takes greater strength to be gentle than it does to be cruel, that it takes stronger personal discipline to demonstrate change than to coerce it, and that it takes deeper love to accept the

imperfections of those we love, than it does to punish them into change. Help us, Lord, as we strive to be the Love and Justice of Jesus Christ to those around us, and open us to the cries against domestic violence within our communities before more lives are destroyed.

[After Silent Confession]

Lord, we confess our complacency by thinking that violence occurs in some other part of the country rather than here. We confess our helplessness in thinking we can do nothing as Christians who serve a God of Love, we confess our hopelessness that the Lord of Resurrection life cannot live and reign in the violence of our society. Lord, hear our prayer, and grant us courage and hope, we pray in Christ's name.

***RESPONSE TO CONFESSION** *By the Waters of Babylon (Sung twice)*
Hymn 245

DECLARATION OF PARDON *(unison)*

Despite our failure, we continue to believe in the goodness of God's creation. We believe in Jesus the Christ, our redeemer and healer, who lived among us in a human family, who proclaimed and lived the true love which brings all persons to their fullness, who gave himself into the violence of the cross so that all violence and death could be overcome by his resurrection. We believe in the Spirit, the Sanctifier, who enlivens us with the spirit of truth and love, who challenges us with the spirit of wisdom and justice to heal all divisions, remove all violence, and reaffirm all goodness that families may be made one, persons may be made whole, and all people may come to the fullness of peace through a community of believers committed to acknowledging family violence among us, removing its causes, and healing its results. Yes, we believe, we believe that God has created goodness, Jesus has brought healing, the Spirit proclaims peace for all families. Amen.

****REMEMBERING THE WATERS OF BAPTISM**

As votive candles are placed in the baptismal font, worshippers are invited to say:

"We place a candle in the Baptismal font to remember; to remember that by water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice; to remember that it is through Baptism that we enter into the covenant that God has established; and that through Baptism we are claimed as God's own. We light this candle to remember the life of (name), precious child of God, a member of our worshiping body and now one of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. As we light this candle we remember that God claimed (name) through Baptism and we also remember our own Baptism, God's visible sign of God's invisible grace."

***HYMN 260** *A Mighty Fortress Is our God*

Prayers for Healing *(adapted from Caroline Sproul Fairless)*

God of grace, you nurture us with a love deeper than any we know, and your will for us is always healing and salvation. God of love, you enter into our lives, our pain, and our brokenness, and you stretch out your healing hands to us wherever we are. God of strength, you fill us with your presence and send us forth with love and healing to all whom we meet.

We praise and thank you, O God.

God of love, we ask you to hear the prayers of your people. We pray for the world, that your creation may be understood and valued. Touch with your healing power the minds and hearts of all who live in confusion and doubt, and fill them with your light. Touch with your healing

power the minds and hearts of all who are burdened by anguish, despair, or isolation, and set them free in love.

Hear us, O God of life.

Break the bonds of those who are imprisoned by fear, compulsion, secrecy, and silence. Fill with peace those who grieve over separation and loss.

Come with your healing power, O God.

Restore to wholeness all those who have been broken in life or in spirit by violence within their families; restore to wholeness all those who have been broken by violence with our family of nations, restore to them the power of your love; and give them the strength of your presence.

Come, O God, and restore us to wholeness and love.

Let us name before God and this community gathered, those, including ourselves, for whom we seek healing...

(those gathered may name individuals silently or aloud)

... that they, in our remembering, may find sanctuary and shalom.

In our homes, our workplaces, our communities, our churches, and in this world.

We lift up before you this day all those who have died of violence.... *(those gathered may name individuals silently or aloud)*

... in that place where there is no pain or grief, but life eternal.

O, God, in you all is turned to light, and brokenness is healed. Look with compassion on us and on those for whom we pray, that we may be re-created in wholeness, in love, and in compassion for one another.

So, let it be so!

PASTORAL PRAYER

READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Judges 19

SERMON

Clinging To the Threshold of Hope

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH 1979 PCUS Declaration of Faith**

In the death of Jesus Christ, God's way in the world seemed finally defeated. But death was no match for God. The resurrection of Jesus was God's victory over death. Death often seems to prove that life is not worth living, that our best efforts and deepest affections go for nothing. We do not yet see the end of death. But Christ has been raised from the dead, transformed and yet the same person. In his resurrection is the promise of ours. We are convinced the life

God wills for each of us is stronger than the death that destroys us. The glory of that life exceeds our imagination but we know we shall be with Christ. So we treat death as a broken power. Its ultimate defeat is certain. In the face of death we grieve. Yet in hope we celebrate life. No life ends so tragically that its meaning and value are destroyed. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

AN INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

***CLOSING HYMN 332**

Live Into Hope

***CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

***POSTLUDE**

*Please rise, in body or in spirit.

**This ritual, developed by PADVN member Bonnie Orth, reminds us of the eternal presence of God who assures us that, even in tragedy, we are profoundly loved by God and Christ. Following the placement of candles in the font, participants who lost family members are invited forward to kneel at the baptismal font for the laying on of hands. Other survivors or individuals who have experienced domestic violence in their own families were encouraged to be the inner circle of folks laying on hands, with the rest of the congregation invited to stand behind them and lay on hands in prayer.

Clinging To the Threshold of Hope

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Kevin E. Frederick

Scripture: Judges 19, selected passages

Our Old Testament Passage today is a highly unusual text, not just because it deals with the graphic violence of rape and murder but because it seems to convey a message devoid of any hope or grace. Although the book of Judges is included extensively in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings of scripture for worship services, the lectionary readings conclude with the close of chapter 18. I can't recall having ever heard a sermon delivered on this text. But in my studies of relational themes throughout the scriptures, I have spent as much or more time with this passage than any throughout the Bible. I think this scripture has something to communicate to the church in a society where violence profoundly impacts the private lives of so many people.

Included in your guide to worship is a blue sheet with some statistics on domestic violence. You may want to make notes on the backside of the sheet during the sermon. Before I read from Judges 19 let me strongly suggest that you read chapters 19-21 on your own and reflect on the implications of this one man's actions on the entire nation of Israel. As I read this text, ask yourself a complex question. Why would such a passage as this be included in the canon (or the collection) of writings we know as Holy Scripture?

Judges 19

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for some four months. Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father's house the girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. His father in law – the girl's father — made him stay, and he remained with him three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there. On the fourth day they got up early in the morning, and he prepared to go; but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Fortify yourself with a bit of food and after that you may go." So the two men sat and ate and drank together and the girl's father said to the man, "Why not spend the night and enjoy yourself?" When the man got up to go, his father-in-law kept urging him until he spent the night there again. On the fifth day he got up early in the morning to leave; and the girl's father said to him, "Fortify yourself." So they lingered until the day declined, and the two of them ate and drank.

When the man with his concubine and servant got up to leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father said to him, "Look, the day has worn on until it is almost evening. Spend the night. See the day has drawn to a close. Spend the night, and enjoy yourself.

Tomorrow you can get up early in the morning for your journey." But the man would not spend the night. He got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus, that is, Jerusalem (approximately two to three miles from Bethlehem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys and his concubine was with him. When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent and the servant said to his master, "Come let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it." But his master said to him, "We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah." They turned aside there to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took him in to spend the night.

Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.) The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the open square." So he brought him into his house and fed the donkeys. They washed their feet and ate and drank. While they were enjoying themselves the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house and began pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house so that we might have intercourse with him." And the man, the master of the house, went outside and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is a guest in my house, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do what you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." But the men would not listen to him. So the Levite seized his concubine and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As the morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

In the morning, her master got up, opened the doors to the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. "Get up," he said to her. "We are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey and the man set out for his home. When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.' "

May God add meaning and understanding to the reading of this Holy Scripture.

Clinging To the Threshold of Hope

Domestic violence: one might think it to be a marginal issue in most Presbyterian faith communities . . . but it isn't. Last fall Betsy Warren, the director of Interlace, a local program designed to assist victims of domestic violence, gave a Minute for Mission for

our annual Peacemaking offering. The session had voted to direct the local portion of that offering towards Interlace. Interlace is a multi-agency program designed to connect victims of domestic violence with a variety of specific services. That afternoon, Betsy had three phone calls from different women that had attended worship that morning. They were calling her for help for themselves.

In my 18 years of ministry, the issue of family violence has periodically surfaced in my work. I recently served for three years on a board of directors of a shelter for women fleeing from domestic violence and I learned firsthand how pervasive a factor domestic violence is in our society. More startlingly I learned of the impact misguided and untrained pastoral counseling has had; in some cases creating far greater problems for the victim, even leading to the death of one woman. If her pastor hadn't insisted that she return home to a violent husband, she might still be alive today. Both the lack of specialized training for church leaders and the silence of the church on domestic violence have contributed to the injustice done to all victims of domestic violence, whether they be women, children, or in some cases, men. For all who profess Christ as Lord and Savior and who seek to follow him, his universal calling to Christians to serve "the least of these" certainly includes all victims of domestic violence.

If someone you know were to confide in you, perhaps a friend or colleague, a family member or even a child, and tell you they were suffering in an abusive relationship, would you know how to respond? Would you know where to point them for help and would you know that the assistance they receive would be beneficial? It is time that we all break the code of silence and educate ourselves regarding this issue and communicate in a clear voice the will of Christ for all families, the most intimate of human relationships.

Let's turn to the scripture text for some help with this issue. "In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what they thought was right in their own eyes." This frequent refrain found throughout the book of Judges, including, to a partial degree, here at the beginning of chapter 19 and completely at the close of chapter 21, communicates the basis of the problem in the entire nation of Israel. Each male looked to himself as being the defining authority on right and wrong. In so doing, the whole nation disregarded the Law of Moses. The story of the Levite and his concubine serves both as an example of the social deterioration of a whole nation and as an illustration of themes found in distorted family relationships today. Levite is a term used to describe members of the tribe of Levi, a people set aside by God, called to provide religious leadership to the nation of Israel. They served as priests, scribes and other religious officials for the whole nation and as a result could not possess land of their own. It is with intentional irony that the Bible presents this Levite, a religious official, at the center of an ethical and moral breakdown of the Hebrew people.

The woman in this story is called a concubine, which is a confusing term for us. Some of us might think of her as a prostitute or a kept woman, at least a woman with a disreputable character. And yet the Levite is both referred to as her husband and as the son-in-law of the woman's father. Why? There is a marital relationship of some

sort here and we learn that in Hebrew society the term concubine referred to a wife of secondary status. In ancient Israel a husband was given the right to remarry if he and his first wife were unable to conceive a child. For example, Abraham's relationship with Hagar while still married to Sarah, was that of a husband with a second wife, or a concubine. We understand the dynamics of this text more readily if we refer to her as a second wife. Some scholars have suggested that the second wife was at fault in this relationship and left her husband after being unfaithful to him but the text seems to suggest another interpretation.

She had left him angry, four months earlier, and now he wanted to woo her back with tender talk. But this biblical phrase "to speak tenderly to her" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament between the man Shechem and a young girl named Dinah who Shechem had raped and then later tried to woo with tender talk towards marriage. In Judges, the strategy of wooing his wife seems to indicate that the Levite had been at some sort of fault, not she. Experts in the field of domestic violence have identified a cycle of violence between an abusive husband and his wife; there is a violent explosion followed by a courtship phase using gifts, apologies, promises and charming behavior until the wife forgives the husband. Then he soon returns to abusive behavior. It is a very predictable pattern in abusive relationships. But domestic violence is not a matter of anger management. It is first and foremost a matter of power and control where one spouse exercises coercive control over the life and well being of the other. In well over 95 percent of reported cases of domestic violence the perpetrator is the male.

The Levite sets out in our story after his second wife to woo her back but when he arrives at her father's home he is diverted away from talking with her by the father's lavish expression of hospitality. The concept of biblical hospitality is central to Hebrew thinking. It is essentially based on a biblical and cultural code of ethics between men, designed to build and strengthen relationships. In our story hospitality is shared between the father-in-law and the husband in the form of a three-day indulgence in food and drink that extends into a fourth and even a fifth day, at the father-in-law's insistence. But the offering of hospitality is noticeably absent towards the woman in this story. So is the Levite's intended tender talk.

Notice there is no mention of dialogue between the husband and his second wife. She remains without voice throughout this ordeal, in a matter that affects her whole future. Very often today in cases of domestic violence, the voice of the woman is not allowed to be heard. When couples counseling is relied on to resolve issues between the two parties, the husband's voice is the dominant voice. The wife cannot speak freely or candidly about her situation, for fear of reprisal at a later time. Using couples counseling as a therapeutic response to domestic violence only further obscures the truth, leaving the perpetrator satisfied that the problem is not his and the victim more confused and frustrated that her issues and difficulties with the marriage have been silenced.

Too often, the institutions designed to help intervene in cases of domestic violence are rendered ineffective by the code of silence, including law enforcement, the legal, the

therapeutic and the religious communities. As a result, even in a communications-based society as technologically advanced as ours, we have only begun to effectively address the code of silence impacting victims of domestic violence. Add to this the knowledge that the United States now refuses to sign a United Nations treaty adopted by 170 nations which addresses all forms of discrimination against women. Although the USA helped to draft this document twenty-three years ago, we today still refuse to sign it, along with three other holdout nations, Iraq, Iran and the Sudan; not good company. On at least one level, this is due to the rise in conservative religious paternalism in each of these four countries, including our own.

When the Levite finally gets up to leave his father-in-law's hospitality and return home, the whole matter is settled. He has made up his mind. He gathers his property, including his slave and his concubine, and heads off late in the day, a time most unwise for a traveler in an unsafe land. He chooses to stop at the well of town of the tribe of Benjamin, thinking himself safe there, and is welcomed in the home of an old man who came from his homeland of Ephraim. The old man extends to this stranger biblical hospitality. During the evening the men of the town, fellow Jews from the tribe of Benjamin, gather outside the home and forcefully demand that the Levite traveler be sent outside so that they might have intercourse with him. But the master of the house went out to speak with the men of the town. "No, my brothers, this man is my guest. Do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want with them, but against this man, do not do this vile thing." But the men would not listen.

This sense of justice offends our sensibilities, and rightly so. But these were distorted times in Israel. Here again, as repeatedly throughout the three-chapter story, we see the underlying refrain of this book illustrated: "In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what they thought was right in their own eyes." Here, biblical hospitality becomes completely distorted and the old man who is most gracious to the stranger thinks it just to offer his own daughter and this woman to the violence of evil men, in defense of the stranger.

In an effort to protect himself, the Levite seizes his concubine and throws her out the door. The Hebrew word here for "seize" implies a forceful action and is most often a verb used to describe complete control over an object. Here it is used with a human being, only one of few examples where this verb found in the Bible is used to describe a controlling force against the will of another person. She has become a dispensable sacrifice used as a substitute to protect the Levite. She is raped, violated by a crowd of men all night and towards morning is finally left alone. She staggers back to the door of the home where they are staying and the Bible says, "falls down at the door of the house where her master was, until it was light." Notice there is no reference to him any more as being a husband; rather, he is referred to with the title of a property owner of animals and slaves. He is her master. After handing over his wife, one would hope that the Levite was racked by guilt, shame or remorse, but there is no hint of that in the text. He appears to get a good night's rest and in the morning he doesn't even rush out to find her. In fact, only after the Levite has made provisions to leave,

only at the last minute does he open the door to go on his way. Only then does he find his concubine, his wife, with her hands on the threshold. It seems ironic that in a culture so focused on biblical hospitality, that none would be offered to this woman.

Hospitality is as closed to her as is the door to security, the door to compassionate care and solace, the door of hope, the door to a healthy marriage. In a land where there is no king, where every man interprets truth for himself, biblical hospitality is even denied to a wife.

How far we have fallen, O Israel, and yet the joyous response of Adam at the first sight of his partner, Eve, still echoes in our ears. This, alas, is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. God had created woman to be man's partner but the Levite, the religious leader, treated her as disposable property, this God-given gift created in God's own image. In a land where there is no King, the text suggests that the Levites' sins were far greater than the men of the town.

This poor woman, who had suffered the worst brutal savagery of her life; this woman had no one to come to her aid. She had been betrayed by her husband, who days before had the intention of wooing her back to him, now she had nowhere to turn to and literally clung to the only hope for life that she had left, the threshold of a stranger where her master was staying. One might think that now would be a prime opportunity to go out to her to speak tenderly to her but no compassion is expressed. "Get up!" he commands callously, "we are going." But there is no answer, so he put her on a donkey and proceeded to return to his home, where her body is grossly violated by dismemberment, to build his case of wrongdoing done to him before the entire nation of Israel. In this last violent act, the Levite uses her body to communicate to the eleven other tribes how he had been violated by the tribe of Benjamin. From beginning to end, this nameless woman is a victim with no voice; a victim with no choices, except between her husband and her father, the two primary men in her life. The unnamed concubine in this story is a metaphor for all the nameless women who silently suffer and endure public and private abuse in every society, including our own. Her story is important for all women whose fate is determined by wrongdoing men.

So, where is the hope? It is not found in the book of Judges but it is found with the turn of the page, when in the book of Ruth we see faith in God and love of family redefined. Hope is found in the fact that the church and, to some degree, our society is waking up to the call to serve as Christ's body to women who have been abused, both within the community of faith and beyond the doors of the church.

The covenant of marriage is a biblical promise of great significance to God and God's people. But the church must recognize that domestic violence violates not only the victim, but damages and destroys the covenant of marriage itself and impacts the whole community in negative terms. A choice to preserve the covenant of marriage, at the expense of the well being of the victim, discounts the sanctity of human life. Abuse in any form is a violation of God's will for humanity, especially for the abused

individual who was created in God's image, but also for the humanity of the perpetrator. When abuse is physical, it damages the body of another, in some cases crippling the victim for life and possibly resulting in death. When abuse is sexual, it distorts the victim's sense of self and their perception of the purpose of sexuality as a sacred gift of God. When abuse is expressed through economic coercion, it creates a distorted dependency of the victim on the perpetrator as the sole source of well-being. Abuse in all its forms is emotionally damaging, destroying an individual's self esteem, potentially scarring their psyche for life. Domestic violence in all its forms instills fear as the predominant emotional state of slavery in the life of the victim. That is far from the will of God.

The church has participated, consciously or not, in a code of silence regarding domestic violence. It is time to break that pattern and to respond with a clear direction and hope, not just to the victim, but also to the perpetrator who seeks to be accountable for his actions. May God open our hearts and lives as, together, we seek to be a light of hope to all families especially those impacted by violence. Amen.

When Words Fail... The Psalms Speak

When trauma visits a congregation, words may escape us. Emotions of anguish, abandonment, fear, and anger may spill out or may be just below the surface. The Psalms, especially those which cry out in lament can stand as a witness to the brokenness within the community. As healing comes, the Psalms can also provide words of newly found trust and praise.

Walter Brueggemann says it well: The Psalms, with a few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity--gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for in those deeply human dimensions the same issues and possibilities persist.... We are prepared to speak among them and with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage. We add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all.¹

The following Psalm suggestions are only examples of how they can be matched with the lament that is being experienced by a congregation. Choose the Psalms you use after listening to the cries of your congregation.

Psalm 22 cries of abandonment (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?), physical and emotional pain and loss (I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint).

Psalm 55 speaks of anguish (My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.)

When emotions are not as raw, turning to the Psalms may give words of healing, hope, and thanksgiving.

Psalm 30 speaks of mourning turning into dancing (Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness...)

Psalm 138 gives thanks (One the day I called, you answered me; you increased my strength of soul.)

Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1986.

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms; A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1984.

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, <http://worship.calvin.edu/> has a listing of Psalm resources and materials. It is a good place to start your research.

Weems, Ann. *Psalms of Lament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

The Rev. Nancy K. Troy, Pastor of Briargate Presbyterian Church,
Louisville, Kentucky and a member of the PADVN Leadership Team.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press), 15, 16.

Prayers of Invocation

God of wondrous love,
you have touched us
and never left us in despair.
You have held us
in our grief and chaos.
You have never deserted us.

You paid us a visit
and your visit has never ended.
You clung to us
when we were given up for dead.

In life and in death—
you raise us anew!
This we know!
This we experience!
This is your word of assurance!

God of wondrous love,
touch us again in this time.
Stay with us--
as we continue healing
our memories and lives.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen

God with us,
we have gathered with a sense
of the sacredness of this space,
aware of your presence flowing from one
person to another.
We come with our wounds wide open,
with our defenses down,
wearing our personal needs like placards,
calling to you as did so many who
approached Jesus,
saying, "Heal me, help me, touch me!"
We work hard at being happy,
at coping, at surviving, at holding on,
but we have come here hoping to let go
and to open ourselves to Christ's healing flow.
Touch our lives, our God, as we worship here
today,
and cast your sunlight through our tears till
rainbows rise,
and plant dreams where wounds leave scars
like furrows in broken ground,
rekindling our hope,
reviving our strength,
refreshing our faith.
Amen

A Service of Commitment to Survivors of Family Violence*

The following Order of Service was designed by an ecumenical group in Cleveland to highlight the issue of family violence and break the silence that surrounds it. It is offered as an example of the kind of service that can be conducted.

Bringing the Secret to Light
Call to Worship

First Reading Ephesians 5:11-17
We are called to expose the secret

Silent Reflection

Communal Confession

God of Mercy, we confess that we are humbled and frightened by the anger, hatred, and violence we know is rampant in our society and in the world, and which we sometimes feel within ourselves. We acknowledge our unwillingness to see the secret of violence locked within our private lives. We confess our unwillingness to hear the voices of pain that need to be heard out of the loud silence. We feel our numbness to the suffering of both the victims and perpetrators of violence, numbering among them ourselves.

God of Forgiveness, we come before you from the pseudo-sanctity of the house that harbors hidden violence. We confess that this is where we all reside. We have been participants by our complacency when we would be compassionate; by being judgmental when we would be empathic; by thinking ourselves outside the family of violence when we would be spiritual kin. Hear now, our silent personal confession.

Hymn "By the Babylonian Rivers"

Assurance of Pardon

Second Reading Luke 13:10-13

Our hope lies in the sign of a woman whose life was unbent by the healing power of God.

Silent Reflection

Statement of Belief and Commitment

We believe in God the Creator,
who created all things and all persons as good,
who entrusted the care of all things and all persons to other persons so that we might preserve,
maintain, and foster that goodness.

We acknowledge that we humans have not always been faithful to that trust.
We have turned God's original blessing into a source of original sin.
We have failed to nurture God's goodness and have created violence even in our families.

Despite our failure, we continue to believe in the goodness of God's creation.

We believe in Jesus the Christ, our redeemer and healer,
who lived among us in a human family,
who proclaimed and lived the true love which brings all persons to their fullness,
who gave himself into the violence of the cross so that all violence and death could be overcome
by his resurrection.

We believe in the Spirit, the Sanctifier,
who enlivens us with the spirit of truth and love,
who challenges us with the spirit of wisdom and justice to heal all divisions, remove all violence,
and reaffirm all goodness that families may be made one, persons may be made whole, and all
people may come to the fullness of peace through a community of believers committed to
acknowledging family violence among us, removing its causes, and healing its results.

Yes, we believe, we believe that God has created goodness, Jesus has bought healing, The Spirit
proclaims peace for all families. **Amen.**

Prayer of Intercession

Sisters and brothers, we acknowledge that violence exists in families in our land, and we commit
ourselves to exposing that violence and freeing those who suffer such violence from its crippling
effects. Therefore, let us pray.

For children who suffer pain, degradation, and rejection from those responsible for their care,
Grant them safety and protection, Lord.

For parents who suffer the anguish of their failures as parents,
Grant them insight and healing, Lord.

For women who are abused and battered by those who profess to love them,
Grant them strength and courage, Lord.

For men who batter those they love,
Grant them the repentance which can change their lives, Lord.

For all those who suffer violence in their families,
Grant them love, solace, and healing, Lord.

For all Christians and people of good will,
Grant them openness to and compassion for those who suffer family violence, Lord.

Lord God, God of Love and Creator of the universe, restore all families to your loving care, Teach
them calm strength and patient wisdom that they may overcome arrogance and division as well as
anger and violence, that they may resolve conflicts without violence, and nurture one another in the
spirit of love and peace proclaimed by Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**

Charge and Benediction

*Used by permission of James Leehan, author of *Pastoral Care for Survivors of Family Abuse*
[Westminster/John Knox Press; Louisville, Kentucky] from which this service was taken.

