

TO LOVE AND TO CHERISH¹
Matthew 11: 28-30
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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They stare lovingly into each other's eyes and repeat the old familiar vow: "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish." +

I

And of course they are sincere. Yet as they recess in excitement down the aisle to begin their married life together, I am aware that one in every four of those marriages will experience domestic violence. While domestic violence can be against men, women account for 85% of the victims of domestic violence. On average, more than three women every day are murdered by their intimate partners in this country. That is a greater death rate than our military is experiencing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Every 15 seconds finds a woman in the United States being battered, usually by an intimate husband or boyfriend or partner. 37% of women who sought treatment in emergency rooms for violence-related injuries are there because of violence by a current or former spouse or intimate partner. In Worcester last year there were over 4,000 cases of domestic violence in which police were called. The Daybreak domestic hotline

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received 6,523 calls last year. There were 1,240 restraining orders recorded in Worcester last year. If you want to have a national health care debate, consider that domestic violence is the number one public health problem for women.

Domestic violence is a non-discriminatory evil. It impacts every neighborhood, race, social and economic class, religion, and every church, spanning all theological positions. As startling as those statistics are, it is even more startling when we remember that domestic violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes. The Public Policy Office of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that only about one-quarter of all physical assaults and one-fifth of all rapes are ever reported.

Our dream is of a family that is a haven of love, security, comfort, and encouragement. But hidden from sight in every gathering is the brutal truth: we live in a world of broken dreams. While we are understandably concerned about the H1N1 virus, and we are all taking precautions against the swine flu, there is another pandemic claiming far more lives. The pandemic of domestic violence is a silent killer, and the voice of the church is largely mute.

Why is that? It is the church community that calls on couples to love and to cherish, but when that dream becomes a nightmare, the church has

often been silent. The church has sometimes ignored domestic violence, covered it up, distorted biblical teachings to excuse it, and participated in it by supporting a male dominated household where the wife is always subservient and has no voice. It is time for the church to face up to it and repent of this evil.

Let it be said clearly: there is nothing in the entire Bible to justify the abuse of another person. There is nothing in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu teachings that would justify physical, verbal, emotional, or economic abuse of an intimate partner. There is nothing in church teachings that could justify breaking promises, abusing trust, harassment, disrespect, threats or intimidation. That is to say, the role of the church is not to ignore abuse, justify abuse, excuse abuse, or participate in abuse. The role of the church is to name it for what it is, create a safe place for those who are abused, and to call abusers to account.

II

Today we read a familiar scripture that is sometimes called ~~the~~ the great invitation.+ It is the invitation of Jesus when he said, *Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens....* I chose this text for today because I am aware that those who are experiencing domestic violence are not just battered; they are also exhausted. They are weary, and they are carrying a heavy burden.

I like another translation of the text that seems to reflect the meaning even more: *Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden....* We all labor. Laboring alone can be a delight; it can be a fulfillment. We are educated to labor. We are trained to labor. We take delight in our labor. But there are those among us who cannot find fulfillment in labor because they *labor AND are heavy laden....* There is an added burden to their labor. That burden is the secret they hold. They think they can tell no one. Some think that it is their lot in life; that it is somehow God's will; that they just have to live with it. They can find no joy in their labor because they are also *heavy laden* with the great secret.

Some have concluded that the vow they took to love and to cherish means that they have no recourse but to endure abuse from the very person who took precisely the same vow. Some feel trapped, much like the psalmist whose anguish we read today: *My heart is in anguish within me...fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest...I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and the tempest."*²

On this day in which we name this evil and call it out, let the church become the voice of Christ when he said, *Come unto me, all ye who labor*

² Psalm 55: 4-8.

and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Rest, in this text, is kin to the meaning of shalom, peace. Come unto me, and I will provide a place of safety for you to be honest with your pain, a place of justice that will hold an abuser accountable, a place of healing that will be understanding and non-judgmental, and a place of education that will face the facts as they are.

This great invitation of Christ is one of the most touching, moving, tender, and thrilling invitations in the entire Bible. He says, *I am gentle and humble in heart*, not violent and explosive and unpredictable. *I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* Soul-restõ what a need; what a necessity! Rest for your soul! My God, what a gift!

III

Paired with this moving invitation of Jesus is an equally dramatic text from the book of Isaiah: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace....*³ I want to tell you the story behind this text.

In ancient times, when an army was in a battle, the only way to communicate the results of the battle was by sending a runner to give the news of the battle to those loved ones waiting anxiously back home. That runner was called a *keryg*. The *keryg* was naturally not the strongest person in the army because they needed strength for the battle. What they

³ Isaiah 52: 7.

needed was a person who could run long distances, who had endurance, and who was faithful to tell the truth.

This famous text from Isaiah reflects the welcome given to a keryg who had run a long distance over the hot and dusty hills to give news of the battle. If you read the entire passage, it pictures the sentinels on the walls of Jerusalem who catch sight of the runner, and word spreads throughout town that the keryg is on the way. He is almost to the gates of the city! And he has good news of the battle!

Can you imagine what an exhausted keryg must have looked like after such a run? His poor feet are not just tired; they are bruised and bloody. But he didn't stop running until he reached the gate of the city and told the good news. No wonder Isaiah said, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger (the keryg) who announces peace, who brings good news...who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"* Those hot, dusty, bloody feet never looked so good! There was news of peace!

To you who bear that secret burden, the church brings good news. Religion is not your enemy! Religion is not your burden! Healthy religion does not blame you, reproach you, dismiss you, censure you, or impeach you.

Healthy religion opens its doors wide and welcomes you home.

Healthy religion gathers you into a community of caring and nurture, binds up your wounds, acknowledges your pain, listens to your anger and hurt, provides a safe place, and plans realistic strategies for a new and healthy future.

IV

When the early church looked for a word to describe the good news of Jesus, they took this ancient image of the keryg, the little fellow who ran long distances to give the good news, and they used it to give a name for the Good News of Christ. They called it the *kerygma*.

They called it kerygma; you can call it what you will. But know this: it is Good News—God's Good News. There is a place of peace and acceptance. You don't have to bear your secret alone anymore.