

Whitton Avenue Distinctives

Week 5: Care for the Vulnerable, Healing for the Abused

Introduction

Our last two Whitton Avenue Distinctives classes focused on “Gender Roles in the Home and Church” and “Marriage and Sexuality.” Historically, conservative evangelicals have been very clear about God’s standards and ideals for the family. What we have not been as consistent about is addressing what to do when leadership in the home or church turns exploitative or abusive. But if we take Genesis 1-2 seriously, which establish male leadership in the home and marriage as the union of one man and one woman, we must also take Genesis 3 seriously, where we see Satan working to create chaos in those relationships. Because of the serpent’s temptation and Adam and Eve’s sin, our first parents shifted from “naked and not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25) to ashamed, hiding, and disloyal toward one another.

Satan has been at work to attack families ever since the Garden of Eden. The structure that God meant to image forth the glory of his intimacy, loyalty, and love often becomes a place of abuse, manipulation, neglect, and intense pain. Likewise, Satan attacks the family of God, the church. The community which is supposed to be loving, gracious, healthy, and safe can often be a place of rivalry, unspoken legalistic rules, jealousy, and harm. Both family and church are places where abuse has taken place in all its forms—physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and spiritual.

This is not a pleasant reality to discuss. It is very personal for our church, because abuse took place within these walls. That was decades ago and by God’s grace our church’s attitude toward handling such tragedies has radically changed. But part of how we seek to create an environment of protection for the vulnerable and healing for survivors of abuse is to acknowledge that abuse happens. Abuse and neglect happen in godless, immoral contexts and abuse and neglect happen in squeaky-clean religious contexts.

Because we believe in the goodness of God’s authoritative structures in the home and in the church, we also must be vigilant to ensure that the responsibility carried out by elders in the church and husbands in the home does not exploit the weak or silence suffering. This involves giving voice to all who have experienced harm at the hands of others and acknowledging every human being’s propensity to hurt others. In fact, it may seem counter-intuitive, but the most harmful thing we could do is to assume that there are some particularly sanctified individuals among us who could never do harm. Our doctrine of total depravity teaches us that everyone is capable of every sin. As we await our glorification, only by living out a daily life of repentance of our sins and belief in the gospel can we be in relationships without hurting one another.

We will approach this topic by answering 4 sets of questions:

–Who are the most vulnerable? Why should God’s people care for them?

–How can we be a church that cares for the vulnerable?

–What are the traits of abusive families?

–How can we be a church that offers healing to survivors of abuse?

Who are the most vulnerable? Why should God’s people care for them?

Throughout the Old Testament Law and prophets, the fatherless, widow, and sojourner are highlighted as the most vulnerable of society. Think about what these all have in common. In a culture where male landowners held the most power, these groups comprised the economically and politically least powerful bloc of society. Had sin not entered the world, this problem would not exist. Fathers would not die or abandon their families. The land would yield plenty of food and governments would rule justly, so migration for survival would not be necessary. But we live in a fallen world, and the fatherless, widow, and sojourner find themselves with the least amount of power in that world.

For instance, Ruth was a widow and a sojourner (immigrant from Moab) who had no means of income or survival. Because Boaz obeyed God’s law and left the corners of his field for people in Ruth’s situation to glean, she was able to survive. But even then, because of her low status, she was particularly susceptible to physical and perhaps sexual attack. Thus Boaz instructs her, “do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women...Have I not charged the young men not to touch you?” (Ruth 2:8–9) One commentator writes, “Boaz is hereby instituting the first anti-sexual-harassment policy in the workplace recorded in the Bible.”¹

Boaz serves as a model of care for the vulnerable. But why? Why should Boaz care for a woman from Moab? Why should he offer protection to a young widow? This protective action is rooted in the very character and redemption of God himself. Let’s look at the Law of Moses where such concern is commanded.

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.” (Deuteronomy 10:17–22)

God reminds Israel of their place as the lowest of the low in Egypt. In their slavery they had no rights, no voice, no freedom, and no power. God powerfully worked on their behalf to rescue them from that place and bring them into the Promised Land. Because of their radical deliverance and gracious entrance into the land, God calls them to reflect his

¹ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 660.

merciful initiative toward them by showing merciful initiative toward the least powerful of society.

This is given explicit shape in Deuteronomy 24:17–22, which will help inform how we answer the next question.

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”

How can we be a church that cares for the vulnerable?

Who are the vulnerable in our day? Who are the groups with the least amount of power? Modern day examples include abused women, children, those with physical or developmental disabilities, and immigrants.

What are we already doing to care for the vulnerable?

- ARRP: Abuse Risk Reduction Policy
- Foster care
- Outreach with Choices Pregnancy Centers
- Support of Hope Women’s Center
- Ministry to immigrant families in our neighborhood

What could we do more to care for the vulnerable?

- Creating work opportunities for the most vulnerable (modern-day gleaning laws)
- Bridging the “homework gap” between immigrant parents and their school-aged children
- Engage with children in the foster care system
- Provide support for victims of domestic violence in our neighborhood

What are the traits of abusive families?

“Now Absalom, David’s son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David’s son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David’s brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, “O son

of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. And when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him." So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." She answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up! Go!" But she said to him, "No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her." Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.

And her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar lived, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had violated his sister Tamar." (2 Samuel 13:1–22)

Traits of abusive families:²

- Can be seen as "good," religious families
- The victim is made responsible
- The truth is ignored
- Abusers use force and manipulation against their victims
- Victims are shamed, blamed, and demeaned
- A strict code of silence is created

² From Dr. Steven Tracy's article, <http://mendingthesoul.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Rape-of-Tamar.pdf>

How can we be a church that offers healing to survivors of abuse?

- Make no assumptions about any individual or family being incapable of abuse
- Talk about abuse as something that many in our congregation and community have experienced
- Serve as mandatory reporters for any instance of abuse or neglect
- Humbly allow our own past of abuse to strengthen our resolve to create a safe environment
- Create space for survivors of abuse to talk through their stories and celebrate stories of healing
- Commit to being a place of healing and redemption for survivors of abuse and neglect
- Hold leadership accountable to Christ-like standards of servant leadership rather than authoritarian rule