

# **Hands Shouldn't Hurt**

**Scripture: Psalm 10**

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People of God: A week or so ago, Pope Benedict visited Great Britain. It was visit in which he urged Britons not to abandon their Christian roots, since the Christian faith is vital to a healthy democracy. But in some ways, this crucial message was overshadowed by the scandal of abuse done by priests in the Catholic Church. It is a scandal that first rocked the American Catholic Church and now has shaken the European Church, at a time when, the Church is trying to maintain its witness in an increasingly secular Europe.

The problem the Catholic Church faces is two-fold. First of all, there is the abuse that happened by various priests throughout the years. But secondly, this problem was compounded by the poor response of the Church's hierarchy. Instead of removing priests who abused, from their office, they merely reassigned them to other parishes, where the cycle of abuse continued.

Now to be fair to the Catholic Church, the percentage of priests who have abused is not greater than the general population. We tend to forget that there are over 400,000 priests in the world. Less than one percent has abused. But that's enough to cause this crisis. In addition, most cases of abuse arise from the 60's and 70's when the Catholic Church was in great flux over radical changes and when all institutions did not take abuse as seriously as we do today. That's not meant as an excuse, but it puts things into perspective.

The scandal has indeed done serious damage to the credibility and image of the Church. The church's witness to the world has been tarnished. Of course, for those who have been abused, the emotional and spiritual damage done is fairly significant. Given that these cases are done within the context of the Church, which is suppose to be a safe place for children, youth and adults, this is a grave spiritual problem.

Unfortunately, it is not unique to the Catholic Church. Rates of abuse within Protestant Churches are at the same level as in the Catholic Church.

That includes the Christian Reformed Church. We have not been immune from cases of abuse within our own denominational walls.

Now abuse within the church is actually a small percentage of abuse cases. Most abuse occurs in the home. Nor is it limited to children and youth. Spousal abuse has always been a big concern. Now there is an increasing concern for elder abuse, since our seniors in nursing homes are very vulnerable, especially those with dementia. And so, abuse can touch anyone anywhere.

But as a church, we have a specific responsibility for those under our care. We are to be a haven of safety and healing, not a source of abuse and brokenness. As a denomination, we have learnt the hard way of the necessity of developing abuse prevention policies. That's why our own local church has its policies, which we need to follow. While we cannot become too paranoid or let the policies become a straightjacket in stopping ministry, we do need to take some basic precautions. Such a simple thing as having windows in our doors can be an effective way in preventing abuse from occurring.

Now the topic of abuse is one we prefer to keep silent. It's not freely talked about. That's understandable. But silence, inaction, denial—will not do. Leaders of the church need to learn the kinds of abuse that exist and know how to respond when cases arise. It's one reason we have the Abuse Prevention Team in our Church. The task of this committee is to ensure abuse prevention policies for our church are followed, as well as to assist victims of abuse.

Now when I was asked to preach on this subject, I thought that I would be stuck in finding an appropriate Scripture passage that would correspond with this topic. But then, in looking at our denominational Safe Church Ministry Website, I discovered their suggestions for sermon texts. That led to Psalm 10. A psalm very appropriate to be read by a victim of abuse.

Psalm 10 is a Psalm of lament, in which the Psalmist cries out to the Lord for help because of an oppressive situation. It may not be a case of abuse, but his description of the evildoer, his cry to the Lord and the Lord's response, all do fit a victim dealing with abuse.

In this Psalm, we have a description of the evildoer, a wicked man, a person who thinks that he can get away with the oppression he is carrying out:

In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,  
who are caught in the scheme he devises.

He boasts of the cravings of his heart;  
he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord.

This description reveals a person with an evil heart. Now that is strong language, but it reflects the underlying concern.

Abuse is a matter of the heart. A person who abuses distorts what God meant for good. Adults in charge of children are to provide care and nurture. But a twisted heart abuses that privilege. A husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the church, not to use his wife as a punching bag. A personal support worker is called to provide loving care, not taking advantage of a vulnerable person. To distort relationships for what God meant for good is a reflection of a heart twisted and distorted by sin.

An evil heart expresses itself with evil words. Verbal abuse is a very common form of abuse. The psalmist expresses it this way (in verse 7):

His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats;

Trouble and evil are under his tongue.

Manipulation, threats, demeaning words—these are verbal tools an abuser uses in order to control his victim.

From evil words spring the evil actions of abuse. Things that are done that should never be done. Hurtful actions done in secrecy. The Psalmist gives expression to this reality (in verse 8):

He lies in wait near the villages;

From ambush he murders the innocent,

Watching in secret for his victims.

He lies in wait like a lion in cover;

He lies in wait to catch the helpless,

He catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.

His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength.

The abuser is the one with the power and he thinks he can get away with his evil deeds.

Now from the description of the Psalmist it would seem that it would be easy to identify this wicked man. But that is not the case when it comes to abuse. Because of the cloak of secrecy, because the abuser can put on a good front to everyone else, because the victim is afraid to say anything, the abuser gets away with his evil words or deeds. But let there be no mistake about it, the actions of abuse are simply wrong. They arise from a heart twisted and distorted by sin.

But Psalm 10, not only describes the stark reality of the wicked man, it is also a cry from the victim to the Lord. That's why this Psalm is called a Psalm of lament. It is a crying out to God, from the midst of pain and loneliness. It begins with a bitter lament:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

The silence of God. Perhaps that can be the most troubling aspect to abuse. The feeling that God has abandoned you. As a victim, you already feel that

others have abandoned you, but how can God? Why does God allow this? Why doesn't he stop this?

And when abuse happens within the context of the church, by someone who is suppose to represent God, then these questions become even more troubling. When a religious leader even uses religious words to keep the abuse secret or to justify the abuse, then, the victim may even struggle to raise these questions.

But eventually the Psalmist, this victim of oppression, eventually realizes that the Lord will hear him. He gets beyond asking, where are you God, to: Do something God: (vs. 12-15)

Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.

Do not forget the helpless.

Why does the wicked man revile God?

Why does he say to himself, "He won't hold me to account?"

But you, O God, do see trouble and grief;

You consider it to take it in hand.

The victim commits himself to you;

You are the helper of the fatherless.

Break the arm of the wicked and evil man;

Call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.

It seems as if the oppressor, the abuser, trips up when he says: God does not care. He won't do anything to me. In fact, God is on my side. Then the victim realizes the lie for what it is. Because deep down he knows God does not tolerate such evil acts.

And so he makes his appeal to God to act, because of who God is and because of what God is able to do. God is a God of love and justice. Abuse goes counter to God's love and so God will hold those who abuse accountable to him.

God does see. God does hear the cry of the victim. And God does respond. The rest of the psalm describes the response of God. God will hold the wicked accountable for their actions, both in this lifetime, as well as in the final judgment. God will also comfort and heal the victim, restoring them to full health. And God makes sure the oppression, the abuse comes to an end. That's how the psalm ends:

You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted;

You encourage them, and you listen to their cry...

In order that man, who is of the earth, will terrify no more.

These are words of assurance that the victim can hold on to.

But the question arises: How does God do these things? Through the final restoration of all things accomplished through Jesus Christ. Jesus in his

ministry showed compassion to those who were on the fringes of society. Jesus used his hands, not as a force of abuse, but as an agent of healing. He touched the unclean leper, the woman with a flow of blood, the widow's dead son. As we were reminded last week, Jesus touched and blessed the children. The hands of Jesus did not hurt others, but were a means of healing, restoration and blessing.

And the hands of Jesus, today, are the hands of the church. We, as the people of God, are called to be agents of God, the hands of Jesus, the instrument of the Spirit.

And so we have a responsibility to speak out against abuse, rather than being an instrument of it. That means we need to take reasonable steps to ensure the church is a safe environment for everyone. It's why we have abuse prevention policies. Reasonable steps. In fulfilling our ministry, there will be risks. As soon as you deal with children and youth, you are open to false accusations. But as long as we have taken reasonable steps to create a safe church environment, we have done what we can do.

And in the name of Jesus Christ, we can offer healing to both victim and abuser. The Safe Church Ministry team of our Classis offers counseling and support to those who have been victims of abuse. As a church, we too need to do, what we can to help those who have been victims of abuse.

But the abuser also needs our attention. He (or she) needs to be confronted with his abuse and held accountable. He also needs to be offered the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. He can be forgiven. Even the vilest offender, which today would be those who peddle child pornography. But this forgiveness requires facing up to and dealing with the consequences of one's actions. That means justice must be done.

Justice also requires fair treatment of the accused. False accusations, poor memories, different cultural expectations—all need to be taken into account. Years ago the strap was an acceptable form of punishment in school. Today, some might call it abuse. But then it was acceptable. That needs to be taken into consideration. Memories of what took place 20, 30, 40 years ago are easily distorted over time and take a life of their own. And so need to be treated with great caution.

I don't say these final words to dismiss or ignore real cases of abuse in the past. They have happened. Unfortunately, they continue to happen. We need to ensure that it does not happen, especially under our watch in the church. Because the church needs to a safe place, a haven of healing, forgiveness and restoration in Jesus Christ. Amen.