

Safe Church: Theological reflection

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Down the street from where I live, at a “world class” university, some male students are being brought to task for draping signs on their fraternity house, the essence of which encouraged date rape. Some in the community dismiss their actions, either because they are “just boys” or because “their mothers ought to have taught them better.” Young women and old women in my sphere of family, friends, and colleagues, are posting in social media or whispering to confidantes about sexual assaults and violence committed by men against them – some of them telling for the first time. At the motel along the highway between my town and the next, a human trafficking ring was broken up and a dozen or so young girls and women are needing deep healing and protection. In just recent years, well over 2000 Indigenous women¹ in Canada are now missing and either proven or presumed to be murdered or enslaved. Rates of sexual violence and child abuse rise in proportion to poverty rates. And all of this just the tip of a hard, deep, and searing-cold iceberg of reality in my own country, let alone in the rest of the world.

As I write this reflection, the President of the United States can be heard in newscasts driving a crowd to laughter as he mocks the woman who testified to assault by a now-US Supreme Court judge. In her testimony is a familiar-to-survivors account of the crystal-clear memory of the laughter of the men, the cruelty of mockery.

Mockery – using voice from a position of enormous power to discount and distort realities – has the effect of puffing up the one who is making the ‘joke,’ reinforcing a power that is proven, by its acts of mockery, to be fundamentally abusive in nature. It is, sadly, all too familiar to women the world over who experience acts of silencing. God’s brutalized creation cries out in pain: the suffering of the poor, the abused, the violated, the tortured, the enslaved. Some dictum from another era makes the point that when the devil laughs, creation doubles yet again in pain. Mockery, silencing, and dismissal of the primary pain of abuse creates yet another layer of suffering. Blinded by the need of abusive power to continue to feed itself, it slashes at all that is holy: this mockery is no less than a further violation of the very cross of God-incarnate. It spits scorn in the face of victims of violence and violation. Why? Because it can. Because to do otherwise is to suggest that there is another path other than the accumulation of more and more power.

Mockery of those who suffer at the hands of powerful others – and the unflinching support for those who lead the mockery - is perhaps the most telling sign of sickness in societies that have turned away from kindness, humility, care, grace, and the vulnerability of love.

¹ The statistics are kept and defined in different ways by different bodies. The Assembly of First Nations identifies that there may be even up to 4000 cases of missing and/or murdered Indigenous women.

Where the devil laughs, Jesus weeps, and the Holy Spirit calls and equips Christ's body to widen its embrace of comfort and healing. To be, truly, sanctuary for all of suffering creation, that healing and new life can take root and grow.

I am learning all of this by paying attention to the witness of women who suffer rape and torture, and to the witness of women who carry those bodies and tend to those wounds. As I learn, I am drawn to ask new questions of myself and of the church.

I live and work in a context where it is an accepted and even celebrated value that the church must provide safe spaces for all, especially for those whose vulnerability make them targets for abusers. We take care to put windows in office doors and to coach pastors in what is inappropriate touch and unacceptable, manipulative behaviour that does harm, whether it is bullying or sexual misconduct. We have safeguarding training and checklist for policy development and implementation to keep predatory persons away from at risk populations. These are the things that we usually have in mind when we think of 'safe church' practices.

But Jesus asks far more of us. The risen Christ bids us to be witnesses to the resurrection, and more – to carry so deeply in our souls the reality of God's gift of healing and reconciliation through the cross and resurrection that our lives are all about that healing that Christ brings. Our lives – the life of the church itself – must be filled with the vulnerable strength that comes from tending to the victims of the violence perpetrated by other human beings. When we are formed by this cross-shaped embrace we have to ask deeper questions than whether or not we are living up to safeguarding policy demands. We need to tend to the world with cross-formed attentiveness that first and always makes priority of space, or preferential option, for the victims of human abuses of power.

Safeguarding and prevention of abuse inside the church are critically important, but unless there is a concomitant active mission of care and healing out in our neighbourhoods and world, might we not be creating another fortress church? Albeit, it might be one in which behaviours are well scrutinized and a certain degree of safety can be counted on as we drop off our children or elders for church activities. Even if we recognize that we will have predatory personalities and abusers of power in our midst, our inclination, if we follow a mere risk-management approach, will be to excise them from our midst and return to our sanctuaries where all are safe from harm and victimization is at the very least minimized. At least that's the illusion with which we might comfort ourselves.

But here's the thing: the body of Christ is an active part of God's missio in the world, agent of healing and reconciliation, herald of the new creation being revealed. To live 'safe church' values is not merely about safeguarding those in our care – not to minimize that necessity, but we will slip into naïve fortress mentality if we stop there. To live 'safe church' values is to become agents of care and healing, binding up the wounded around us. It is actively to search out the hurting and the abused around us, to witness to their pain and the layers of suffering that go with the original pain inflicted. It is to tend to the cross of Christ with patience and love, as did the women at Golgotha.

No matter how well we shape safeguarding policies – and we must shape them extremely well, and with all the smarts and insights from specialists – we are called to more. This is what I have

been learning by listening to women around me and around the world: that it is in tending to the wounds of the world that we learn Christ.

There is holiness in wounds. To be clear – I am not saying that suffering is itself ‘holy.’ Rather, that there is holiness to be found in wounds. Holiness is what calls forth love, compassion, care, and humility in us. The holiness of wounds is in the way they call forth holy action as we behold them with those eyes of compassion, love, and care. When we tend to wounds, we learn to unmask those who mock victims of violence to be the servants of the Lie that they are. We discover how to confront our tendencies within our own souls to mask or discount or in other ways contribute to the suffering of God’s creation. We learn better to identify the roots and tentacles of abusive power.

And, as the women who tend the violated and abused body of Jesus were the first to witness to the resurrection, so may we, in tending to the victims of abuse, violence, torture, and slavery in our midst, experience those first inbreakings of God’s reign of true peace, where none will hurt or destroy.