

'ESTABLISH JUSTICE AT THE GATE' JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

PROPER 23, YEAR B

Lectionary Texts: Job 23:1-9, 16-17 Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Psalms 22:1-15 & 90:12-17
Mark 10:17-31 Hebrews 4:12-16

Focus Text: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

⁶ Seek the LORD and live, or [the LORD] will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. ⁷ Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

¹⁰ They hate the one who reproves at the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

¹¹ Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. ¹² For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. ¹³ Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. ¹⁴ Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵ Hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication. Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint. 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; truly, I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest." Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech; for I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace. It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. 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. But I call upon God, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and [God] will hear my voice. [God] will redeem me unharmed from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear, and will humble them –because they do not change, and do not fear God. My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me with speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords. Cast your burden on the LORD, and [the LORD] will sustain you; [the LORD] will never permit the righteous to be moved.

Psalm 55:1-2, 5-14, 16-22

[Jesus] said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

Mark 4:21-25

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY REV. SHADRA SUZANNE SHOFFNER
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Amos was a humble herdsman whose life was devoted to serving the Lord, and his life-style reflected this devotion. He was not the son of a prophet or the son of a priest, just an ordinary person who loved God. His name means burden or burden-bearer. Amos' life would have easier if he had just stayed in Tekoa, providing for his family by tending sheep and also caring for fig trees in the Judean countryside. But God

gave Amos a vision of the future and told him to take his message to Israel, the northern kingdom. So Amos obeyed, and thus his name became his life.

The prophet carried a very serious message to Israel. Amos spoke God's judgment on nation after nation around Israel's borders and moved on to speak against Israel and even Judah. The first chapter of Amos contains a grisly account of the Ammonites ripping open pregnant women in order to expand their own territory. God is not pleased and promises vengeance. The second chapter describes God's anger with both Israel and Judah for a host of transgressions: selling the poor as slaves, exploiting the poor, engaging in sexual sins, taking illegal collateral for loans, and worshiping false gods. The third chapter describes violence and oppression in Israel and Judah because they no longer know how to do what is right. God warns the people through Amos the burden-bearer, but they do not listen. Chapter four compares Israel's wealthy women to the "cows" of Bashan – pampered, sleek and well-fed (Psalm 22:12). These women are blamed for causing their wealthy husbands to oppress the poor in order to support their rich lifestyles. Chapter five is almost shocking because Amos sings a song of lament which sounds as though Israel has already been destroyed. The Israelites believe their wealth and rituals make them secure, but Amos sadly tells them that their laws and courts have become places of greed and injustice. "Seek the Lord and live, or God will break out against the house of Joseph like fire." (Amos 5: 6) "They hate the one who reproves at the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth (Amos 5:10).

"One who reproves at the gate" refers to an honest judge. In the time of Amos, the city gate was a place where justice was meted out by judges who dealt fairly and equitably with all who cried out for help. Amos tells the people that God is not pleased by their abandonment of this practice. No longer do they allow judges at the gate who discern truth and administer justice fairly to all concerned. Now, the people of Israel pretend to be holy while trampling on the poor, taking bribes and pushing aside the needy.

This timely lesson is a cry for justice for our day and time. The poor and abused are often defenseless victims of domestic violence without advocates or money enough to be heard or protected by our court systems. As people of faith we are called to ensure that these victims of violence receive justice at the gates of our courts. The burden-bearer Amos is still speaking to us today!

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. SHADRA SUZANNE SHOFFNER

When I'm wearing a certain favorite T-shirt which says, "You can't beat a woman," I get mixed reactions. Lots of people smile and say, "You got that right! Women do everything to hold this world together. You sure can't beat a woman." Then there are those who read the message on the shirt and almost look sad. I've noticed one or two women whose eyes became teary when reading the shirt. Others have said

"No, but some people DO (beat a woman)." So my provocative shirt from Family Abuse Services of Alamance County, Inc. is certainly a conversation starter.

Domestic violence is ever with us and the statistics sadly bear this out. Nearly one-third of American women report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a Commonwealth Fund survey. When the person you once trusted and chose to be with you as lover, friend or spouse becomes a monster who will physically and/or emotionally harm you, you feel betrayed and oppressed. You may also feel like a victim who participates in, and even is partially responsible for, the pain and the hurt.

I spent four weekends at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women in a Christian outreach program called "Kairos." Three of us from the "outside" would be placed at a round table with three from the "inside." We shared meals and talks and music throughout three days and lifted up the possibilities God offers for healing and renewal. The insiders were incarcerated for one reason or another. We never asked why they were imprisoned. But we listened to each other's stories.

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As I listened, it struck me that nearly every woman there had a story which included domestic abuse. Some of these women had been sexually abused by their own fathers. Some were in tragic relationships with boyfriends or husbands who abused them physically and emotionally. Often, a woman would blame herself for the abuse. "I guess I should never have told him off that way," she might say, as though there is any excuse for violence.

As each weekend unfolded, I usually became attached and connected emotionally to one of the women at my table. A woman I'll call Beverly was able to describe the shame of incest and rape and talked about how she continued to be tortured by guilt and shame. We tried to point out that she was a survivor who could find courage in community, the type of Christian community being presented that weekend. Her own relatives had betrayed her, but in the midst of this, a seed of forgiveness was being planted. She would be leaving prison within the year, and we wanted her to find a church family she could trust. She knew her Bible, but she had also learned that patriarchy and other oppressive systems were also part of the historical context of scripture. She avoided churches because she saw them as communities which often continue to lift up these tired stereotypes and lies. We pointed out how Jesus had to confront patterns of hatred and prejudice and that he challenged systems of his day which were unjust. She loved the stories of the woman at the well and the woman who had been caught in adultery.

Beverly, although wounded emotionally and spiritually, was very intelligent and courageous. When she was released from prison, she chose not to return to the abusive situation from which she had come. She left a life of self-hatred, re-discovered her self-esteem, and became a teacher's assistant in one of our local school systems. I was able to follow her life journey through the eyes of her kind and gentle female pastor, a minister who continues to mentor her now that she is "on the outside." She has found a place with a church community that has become her loving and accepting family.

Not all stories of people who are abused end so positively. We in the church need to look around and realize that about one-third of all women in our lives—workplace, family, church and social and civic groups—one-third of them have a story to tell. Who is listening? Who will help them find justice at the gate? Who can proclaim to them that God longs to hold the broken and lonely survivors in the warmth of sheltering love and community....that God's mercy is available for them? When you and I discover the truth of redemptive love flowing out to heal the deepest violations, we will become part of God's healing in this world. Justice and healing are the message. Are we listening? Can we see the face of Christ in the faces and places of suffering? May we be lifted up on God's shoulders so that we see the ones who need our loving care!

WORSHIP AID – 'ESTABLISH JUSTICE AT THE GATE'

RESPONSIVE READING

Reader One:

We gather together aware of the violence around us:
the physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect of children,
including abuse by religious leaders;
the murder and beatings of women by their partners;
the forced prostitution of young women and men in the U.S. and Canada and other parts of the world;

Reader Two:

the sexual harassment of women in the workplace, including the church;
the exploitation of women and children for profit and pornography;
the rape of countless women within marriages and dating relationships;

Reader Three:

the further violence perpetrated against women in the court system;
ritual abuse and mutilation of women and children;
the atrocities suffered by the victims of war.

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One: In naming these forms of evil, we feel grief and pain.

All: Loving God, you are the one who desires that all people be brought into right relationship with one another and with you. Show us the path to justice and fill us with your healing power. May we experience your presence among us as comforter, sustainer and healer.

(from The Sabbath of Domestic Peace, citing the "Family Violence Packet: A Congregational Resource by the National Ministries ABC/USA," www.sabbathofdomesticpeace.org/resources/worship.htm)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We grieve O God,
when we see the violence in our community between the powerful and the defenseless, men and women, adults and children. As your Church, and as your people, we acknowledge our guilt. We confess that too often we have failed to be your Church. We have felt paralyzed in moments that call for acts of courage and kindness. Apathy and ignorance, prejudice and fear have kept us silent when we should have spoken with conviction and condemned domestic violence in our homes and in our worshipping community. We have ignored and abandoned women, men and children in their pain and suffering. By our silence, we have condoned domestic violence. We confess that too often we have interpreted your Word in ways that justified and even encouraged domestic violence. We confess that too often we have been the last hope for victims of domestic violence, and we have withheld hope. They have come to us for compassion and received, instead, rejection. We long to control our violence and to find new ways to love our neighbor as ourselves— to reach out in love and compassion to be your Church. Forgive us for what is past and show us a new way to be your Church and your people.

Amen.

(adapted from the Joint Churches' Domestic Violence Prevention Project, www.users.bigpond.net.au/stpauls/dvweek.html)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- ✓ When Love Is Found NCH 362/CH 499/UMH 643/GA 865
- ✓ We Shall Overcome UMH 533/CM 372/GA 724/CH 630
- ✓ From Every Stormy Wind That Blows AM 419

w Hymnal Legend w
† UMH – United Methodist Hymnal
† AM – African Methodist Episcopal
† CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal
† CH—Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
† NCH—New Century Hymnal (UCC)
† GA - Gather Hymnal (Roman Catholic)

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

Breaking the Cycles of Violence

Jesus, courageous and vulnerable, you broke the vicious circle.

May we break cycles of violence.

Jesus, bold and brave, you confronted the traditional customs.

May we confront patterns of hatred and prejudice.

Jesus, assertive and strong, you challenged the perpetrators.

May we challenge victimizers and abusers in our day.

Jesus, clear and direct, you drew a line in the sand.

May we refuse to accept injustice.

Jesus, amazing and powerful, you got them to drop their stones.

May we find ways to be in the world

that increase safety, establish fairness and promote peace.

Amen.

(from Mennonite Central Committee, "Worship Materials – Domestic Violence," by Elsie Wiebe Klingler, www.mcc.org/abuse/worship/2003/october.html)

Give Us Compassion

God of compassion, give us openness and compassion for those who suffer from domestic violence and other forms of abuse. May our churches be a safe place where those whose lives are affected by abuse can name the truth of the violence in their lives and be heard with a spirit of oneness and caring. May it be a place where perpetrators of abuse are called to account. May it be a place where all can find justice and healing. May we hear and respond to Jesus' call "Come, follow me" as we work to end violence in all its forms. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ who knows the pain of violence, Amen.

(from Mennonite Central Committee, "Worship Materials – Domestic Violence," by Elsie Wiebe Klingler, www.mcc.org/abuse/worship/2003/october.html)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

• QUOTES •

We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love.
R.D. Laing

Violence in the voice is often only the death rattle of reason in the throat.
H.G. Bohn

Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent. Salvor Hardin

• PERSONAL VIGNETTE •

MAE'S STORY

(This is a true story; however, the victim's name has been changed.)

"My husband and I were high school sweethearts. He had a love for politics, sports, life, and he knew exactly where he was going. We had a perfect marriage—until that first hit. At first, I took his behavior as total love and protection for me. He controlled my every action, my every move—even going to the bathroom. He was an awesome father to my children, but he was unbelievably mean to me.

One night he took me behind an abandoned warehouse; there, he raped me and beat me. I thought I would die there. I finally convinced him that if he killed me, our three kids would be homeless, and he would be in prison. I wanted to do everything I possibly could to keep my family together. When I finally decided to leave, I wanted to say I had given my marriage my all. I did everything I could and realized that it was not enough... I knew I had to go when I realized the message I was sending to my children about abuse.

After a horrible beating one night, I went to a local hospital and a representative from Interact met me there. They were a total support for me. Their assistance got me to the point of belief that I could make it on my own. I could be a single mom with three kids knowing that it's possible to go on with my life..."

From personal stories of victims of domestic violence collected by Laura Hilton,
Director of Communications, Interact, Wake County
www.ncjournalforwomen.com/months/2005_months/may05/may05hilton.htm

• CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES •

W www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/domestic_violence/domestic_violence_issue.html - NC Council of Churches Domestic Violence page, which includes a link to its Policy Statement on Domestic Violence (March 1, 2005), which provides a concise reflection on "Why People of Faith Should Care."

W www.nccadv.org – North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a community of agencies and individuals who serve battered women and their children. NCCADV offers support to member programs and shelters, as well as education to churches and community groups, including technical assistance, training, information about public policy initiatives, and activities to increase public awareness activities.

- W www.nccadv.org/service_providers.htm - A helpful listing of shelters and domestic violence programs by county with contact information.
- W www.nccasa.org – North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, provides information, referrals, and resources to individuals, rape crisis programs, and other organizations, as well as supporting rape crisis programs through training personnel, networking and advocating.
- W www.ncadv.org – National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. According to their website, the mission of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence is to organize for collective power by advancing transformative work by strengthening the leadership of communities and individuals working to end the violence in our lives.
- W www.ncdsv.org – National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, an organization that helps a myriad of professionals who work with victims and perpetrators; law enforcement; criminal justice professionals such as prosecutors, judges and probation officers; health care professionals including emergency response teams, nurses and doctors; domestic violence and sexual assault advocates and service providers; and counselors and social workers. In addition to these professionals, NCDSV also works with: local, state and federal agencies; state and national organizations; educators; researchers; faith community leaders; media; community leaders; elected officials; policymakers; and all branches of the military.
- W <http://endabuse.org> – Family Violence Prevention Fund, an organization that works to prevent violence within the home, and in the community, to help those whose lives are devastated by violence because everyone has the right to live free of violence.
- W www.ndvh.org – The National Domestic Violence Hotline, the only center in the nation that provides information regarding 5000 local and nationwide shelters and service providers available for victims, friends and family who often call for life-saving help. The Hotline operates 24 hours a day in over 150 languages with a TTY line available for the deaf: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
- W www.usdoj.gov/domesticviolence.htm - US Department of Justice, Domestic Violence homepage. The “Office on Violence Against Women” provides many useful links containing information about domestic violence as well as suggestions for what communities can do to combat domestic violence.

Breakdown of types of domestic violence:¹

- ⊖ Sexual Abuse: when the perpetrator pressures or coerces the victim to engage in sexual acts that are unpleasant, repugnant, or painful to the victim. Sexual abuse may involve physical force, the threat of force, or other forms of coercion.
- ⊖ Physical Abuse: the use of bodily force, such as hitting, kicking, punching, slapping, pushing, and/or using weapons.
- ⊖ Emotional Abuse: can be inflicted without ever using physical force. It is the use of words to threaten or intimidate the victim. Often batterers make victims more dependent upon them by isolating their victims from family and friends. Economic coercion is a tool by which the batterer controls the life of the victim by making the victim financially dependent upon the batterer.

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- q Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a Commonwealth Fund survey.²
- q Over 30% of Americans are acquainted with a woman who has suffered violence from her male partner.³
- q North Carolina courts are typically inundated with domestic violence cases. NC magistrates handle about 200,000 domestic abuse cases a year. That's 547 cases a day, or 22 every hour of the day. And these numbers underestimate domestic violence in North Carolina because many women do not file complaints.⁴
- q According to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, 1 in 5 women in North Carolina have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. Over 10,000 North Carolina citizens were affected either directly or indirectly by sexual violence in 2002.⁵
- q Approximately one in five female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner.⁶
- q In a national survey of more than 6,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children.⁷
- q Immigrant women may suffer higher rates of battering than citizens either because they come from cultures which are more accepting of domestic violence or because they have less access to legal and social services. They may also have less community or family support here. And they may believe that the U.S. legal system will not protect them or that they will face deportation if they call attention to themselves.⁸
- q According to the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 75 individuals were murdered in North Carolina as a result of domestic violence in 2004.⁹
- q Among the greatest costs of domestic violence are often its silent victims – the children who are watching. Nationally, it is reported that at least 3.3 million children are exposed to domestic violence every year, and 40 to 60% of the men who abuse women also abuse children. A significant number of these children grow up to repeat the cycle of violence in their own relationships, either as abusers or as victims.¹⁰

1. Adapted from the NC Council of Churches' Policy Statement on Domestic Violence, March 1, 2005.

2. www.helpmateonline.org/factsheet.html, citing The Commonwealth Fund's Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: The Commonwealth Fund 1998 Survey of Women's Health, May 1999.

3. Ibid, citing the Family Violence Prevention Fund and the Advertising Council, 1998.

4. www.common-sense.org, The Common Sense Foundation, citing a Department of Health and Human Resources' study, Responding to Domestic Violence (1996).

5. www.nccasa.org/Resources/statistics.html, North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

6. Family Violence Prevention Fund, domestic violence fact sheet; accessible at <http://endabuse.org/resources/facts>.

7. Family Violence Prevention Fund, domestic violence fact sheet; accessible at <http://endabuse.org/resources/facts>.

8. NC Council of Churches' Policy Statement on Domestic Violence, March 1, 2005; citing "With No Place to Turn: Improving Advocacy for Battered Immigrant Women," Family Law Quarterly. (see Policy Statement for full citation)

9. Ibid, citing the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, www.nccadv.org.

10. Ibid, citing American Psychological Association's Violence and the Family: Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family.

Theological Issues Relating to Domestic Violence¹¹

Religious institutions can be a powerful resource for the abused and the abuser when they are educated on domestic violence and address this problem openly with their congregations. Unfortunately, some churches have not effectively dealt with this issue. Below are some of the issues which have kept the congregations, pastors, and religious institutions from becoming fully involved.

Suffering - Some abused women believe they have a religious obligation to suffer and they misapply this concept to tolerating abuse in their intimate relationships. Religious leaders sometimes reinforce this notion. We must remember that God does not want anyone to suffer needlessly. Suffering happens because of evil in the world. God is present with her in her suffering, but in no way does this mean that God wants her to continue to suffer.

Forgiveness - Unfortunately, the idea of forgiveness is also often misapplied in abusive situations. Women are often encouraged to "forgive" in a way that translates into the batterer not being held accountable for his actions.

Permanency of marriage - The religious idea that it is wrong to separate from one's spouse has often led to women suffering more abuse and in some cases being killed by their partner. We must keep in mind that the physical separation - at least a temporary one - of the husband and wife is often necessary to stop the abuse and get help. Clergy are sometimes the first people a woman will tell about her abuse. This provides religious leaders with a unique opportunity to offer community support, crisis intervention, and referral for help. It is critical that clergy become educated about appropriate ways to provide support and information.

- q North Carolina recently passed important legislation to provide protection against tenant discrimination for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Senate Bill 1029, passed in August of 2005, provides a framework allowing victims to change locks or terminate leases when necessary to escape from a perpetrator. This bill also enhances other protections for victims by allowing protective orders to be extended for two years, rather than just one, and requires that law enforcement deliver copies of protective orders to school principals if the defendant is ordered to stay away from school grounds.¹²
- q Victims of domestic violence can use civil law for protection from some forms of abuse. In North Carolina, civil domestic violence laws are under Chapter 50B of our general statutes. Chapter 50B allows a victim of domestic violence to seek relief from domestic violence by filing for a Domestic Violence Protective Order. It is also referred to as a Restraining Order, 50B Order, or a DVPO. A protective order is a civil court order signed by a judge that offers protection to victims of domestic violence. Victims can get the paperwork from the clerk of court's office or from a domestic violence program where someone will assist them with completing the paperwork. The paperwork is filed with the clerk of court. There is no filing fee for a domestic violence protective order and victims do not need an attorney when they go to court.
- q Domestic violence victims can also seek to have the perpetrator charged with a criminal offense. North Carolina's criminal code covers many acts of violence that commonly occur in abusive relationships; however, most of the laws are not based on whether people are in a relationship.

11. From The Sabbath of Domestic Peace, citing the "Family Violence Packet: A Congregational Resource by the National Ministries ABC/USA," www.sabbathofdomesticpeace.org/domviolence/theological.htm

12. This and the following two facts are from www.nccadv.org.