

Sin in the Community: The Secret Sin of Abuse

Scripture Reading: Ezra 9 and 10 (selected verses)

By: Rev. Andrew Beunk

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The issue of abuse that I'm going to address in light of our text this morning from Ezra, is a difficult topic to reflect on. This is not a sermon I want to preach, but I do feel it necessary to preach. Abuse in its various forms, emotional, physical, and sexual, is a secret sin, so secret that sometimes we think "this never happens in my family, or in my church, or in my community." But the reality is, it does. It happens in the church, it happens in our families, it's happening in our community. The story that has been unfolding this past week concerning the high ranking military official, Col. Russell Williams, has been a horrific reminder of the devastating reality of abuse in the community. And as we listen to all of the people that were close to Russell Williams, who knew him as a close friend or colleague, every single one of them, at least that I've heard or read, said, "I never would have guessed."

It's a secret sin.

And the Bible says that sin must not remain in the community of God's people. It must be exposed, it must be confessed, it must be destroyed.

Quoting the Lord himself, the psalmist writes...*"No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house..."* (Psalm 101:7, NIV)

Why? Because God is HOLY.

The Bible is filled with many passages that speak of the HOLINESS of God. What comes to mind when you think of the word HOLY??

On a lighter note....I remember a number of years ago when I was still living with my family in Hamilton Ontario, sitting in my barber's chair getting a haircut. The woman who was cutting my hair knew me a little bit, knew I lived in the neighbourhood and that I was a pastor. When she asked me how my day was going I told her I was working on my sermon for Sunday morning, and then I asked her if she wouldn't mind helping me. "Sure," she said, "that would be fine." "Ok," I said, "here's a question somewhat out of the blue.... but tell me, what's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the word "Holy"?" All of a sudden she starts laughing... I didn't think I was being very funny... she kept laughing and then it tapered off into slight embarrassment. "Well?" I said...."what came to mind?" She said, "the first thing I pictured was this giant billboard

that I've driven past on my way to the cottage.... and on the billboard is this great big giant COW.... and I thought, "holy cow that's a big cow!!!"

Needless to say, I told her, "I'm afraid that's not very helpful!"

In the Bible when we think of HOLINESS....we first think of God. God is holy. God is separate from all that is evil and defiled. Part of what it means for God to be holy is that his very Being, his Presence, dispels or consumes all that is sinful. All that is not good and right and true and just is dispelled by God's holiness.... Like a light dispels the darkness of room, so God's holiness dispels sin.

What hope then is there for anyone?... for the Bible says that all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Well, from the beginning God made it possible for himself to dwell in the presence of a sinful people by providing his people a sacrifice for sin. The shed blood of that sacrifice was an offering or payment made for sin. As sinful people confessed their sin to God, God made it possible for their sin to be transferred onto the sacrifice and punished, destroyed, consumed. The sacrifice was offered as a payment for sin.... and so in this way, God and his people could dwell together....all this point to the day when a perfect sacrifice would be offered, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Now to Ezra... in Chapter 1, to remind you, our first sermon, God provides a new beginning for his people.... I know the plans that I have for you.... and God brings his people out of captivity to the Babylonians and returns them to the city of Jerusalem.... and by chapter 3, out of the ruins of the Temple, the altar is in place and sacrifices are offered. The people can come into God's presence.

Last week we read of how God made it possible for the temple to be rebuilt.... and there is great joy because the presence of the Living God is now with the community. God dwells with is people.

Now by chapters 9 and 10 we see how the presence of the Living God among his people demands that sin be exposed, confessed, and removed.

Many years have gone by since the temple was rebuilt as described in chapter 6. The temple was completed in 515 BC, now 57 years later, Ezra comes from Babylon in the year 458 along with a group of returning Jews...we read in chap. 7 that Ezra is a teacher well versed in the Law of God.

Chapter 9 reads as follows: [Read Ezra 9; 10:1-4, 9-11]

In the verses that follow they proceed to carry out the will of the Lord... to confess, repent and remove the sin that's in the community.

The people of God have always been called to separate themselves from the sinful practices of the culture in which they live. For Israel, separating themselves meant not intermarrying with the neighbouring nations, lest they fall prey to worshipping false gods and carrying out practices that disobeyed how God had called them to live. God says to his people, "be holy, for I am holy" ... The people of God have always been called to be a "tangible display of God's renewing power....to bring unity and to set all things right." They are to live in obedience to the commands of God and display the life-giving, sin-repelling, fruit of the Spirit....love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. They are to live lives that are good, and true, and right, and just. Sin has no place in the community where the Most High and Holy God dwells. God says, "Be holy for I am holy."

In 1992 a study was carried out by the Calvin College Centre for Social Research on the prevalence of abuse in the Christian Reformed denomination. 1100 questionnaires were sent out and there was a 65% return rate...statistically quite significant. 12% of respondents reported experiencing physical abuse, 13% sexual abuse, and 19% emotional abuse. A total of 28% experienced abuse in one or more of its three forms. That is almost 1 person in 3.

Any therapist, or counsellor, or pastor who has listened to the personal story and experiences of an abuse victim will tell you that the long-term impact on that person's emotional and often physical health is very real. Mental illness, low self-esteem, social insecurity, emotional detachment, destructive thought patterns or behaviours, distrust in authority, sexual deviancy, violent behaviours, compulsive behaviours, loss of faith, are just a few of the numerous ways in which abuse plays out in the life of a victim.

I remember some time ago meeting with a woman who as a girl had experienced sexual abuse by a grandfather and her own father. Though the abuse itself had stopped in her early to mid-teens, she continued to be burdened by its impact. When she married sexual intimacy with her husband was physically and emotionally painful. Later, her own young children brought back painful memories of her childhood. During much of her adult life she has struggled with depression and a low sense of self. Most sadly perhaps, she fears her children have also been victims themselves by the same perpetrator that abused her.

Abuse is a betrayal of trust and an exploitation of power. Victims are often left feeling a deep sense of helplessness, shame, guilt, and alienation. Emotional scars can run very

deep. Since perpetrators are often parents or relatives or people of authority that are meant to be trusted, when abuse happens, spirits are broken even crushed. The Lord puts these kind of people in our lives to help us learn to *trust*, to help us *grow* and *mature* and *respect* authority. But when they abuse that trust and exploit their power, they crush spirits and carve deep emotional scars. ..and too often all of this is experienced in secret. Abuse happens under a dark cloud...and in the darkness lies are believed, deceptions are nurtured, shame, and guilt, and denial is sustained.

Psalms 55 captures some of the emotions.... [READ vv1-8] "it is you...a companion, a close friend, we might add, "someone I trusted," someone I enjoyed sweet fellowship with"....

This betrayal of trust and exploitation of power leaves deep scars.

Once I preached a sermon that God used to speak to someone very personally. After the service he asked if he could meet with me sometime that week in my study. During our meeting this gentleman, at the time in his early 50's shared with me the physical and emotional abuse he received in the Christian school next door to our church by the principal when he was a young boy. "To this day," he said, "I find it very difficult to walk the halls of the school. The shame and the guilt and the physical pain I experienced from the discipline of that principal still brings resentment and anger into my heart whenever I think about that place. When I listened to your sermon, I sensed there was hope."

All of us know, if we've read the Bible, that Jesus has a very special place in his heart for children, I would add, teenagers, and any who are vulnerable.... Jesus says, "*And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*" (Matthew 18:5-6, NIV)

Because the word for "sin" can also be translated "stumble", the *Living Bible* translates that verse like this: "if anyone causes one of these little ones who trust in me to lose their faith..."

Jesus has a special place in his heart for children....teenagers....victims....

It seems to me that there are at least two things that victims of abuse need to hear this morning, there may be other things as well, but I want to say two:

1. The first thing that victims of abuse need to hear are these words, and I believe they come from Jesus himself, "it's not your fault"...."you did nothing to deserve

- this”..... Psalm 56:8 says that God hears your prayer to him and he records all your tears on his scroll.
2. The second thing that victims of abuse need to hear is “you are not alone” ... of course, Jesus is with you.... but so are others, when the stories are shared with others, when they are shared with authorities, church authorities, civil authorities.... when the perpetrators are identified and held accountable... then the dark cloud gets lifted... the secrecy is removed...and truth and light can begin to shine in. “You are not alone.”

We need to know something about perpetrators... first let me read this excerpt from a book called *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches: Understanding the Issues*, by Patrick Parkinson... it deals with `sex offenders` in particular, but it describes I think, perpetrators more generally:

Many years ago there were experts who used to talk about the ‘profile’ of a sex offender against children. It is now accepted that no such profiles are reliable. ... It would be much easier for us to recognize perpetrators of sexual abuse if they had horns and tails. But perpetrators are not thinly disguised devils. We could not pick them out in a crowd. They are human beings like all of us. They marry and have children, they work with us in our places of employment, they are our neighbours and friends. We meet them on social occasions and they come to dinner. They may even be members of our own family. ‘They’ are ‘us’.

And they are in our churches. They sing with us in the church choir or music group. They offer themselves as candidates for the ministry or volunteer to run the youth group and they do so with a complex mixture of motivations.¹

What must be said in light of Ezra 9 and 10 and other passages in the Scriptures is: Perpetrators must be confronted, they must be stopped, and they must be held accountable. One victim of sexual abuse by a brother-in-law who happened also to be a pastor said this in a message she formulated for other victims, “If this ever happens to you, yell at the top of your voice till someone listens, and go to the police right away.”² ... she went on to say, “These events in my life have destroyed my faith, I’ve burned my Bibles.”³

¹ Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches: Understanding the Issues* (Routledge, 2003) 31-32.

² Nick Ringma, *The Banner*, November 20,2000, p. 9.

³ Ibid.

Perpetrators must be held accountable. Why? At least two reasons: 1) what they've done is wrong and it needs to be confronted. The Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to touch their life in tangible ways. And 2) maybe more importantly... study after study has shown that these are not one-time, flash-in-the-pan, occurrences. They recur. Oftentimes, again and again.

The countless stories we have read about in the media of priests abusing young boys and being shuffled from one parish to the next in order that the church might save face and protect the honour of the clergy, has shown that perpetrators repeat their behaviour... **THE SECRET MUST BE EXPOSED SO THAT THE BEHAVIOUR CAN BE STOPPED.**

That brings me to an important point that needs to be made in light of this secret sin. When this type of sin happens in the community of God's people, it must be addressed. Ezra 10 tells us the great length that the people went through in order to address the matter that was in the community and undo the effects of intermarriage that was corrupting the community.

Church leaders often handle these situations poorly. Admittedly they are difficult situations. Sometimes they are uncovered years later and it feels like opening an old wound. Leaders are tempted to think that time heals, let bygones be bygones, don't poke your fingers into a hornet's nest. The trouble is, these attitudes, while they may be understandable, are wrong. They serve to re-victimize the victims, and protect the face of the perpetrator.

Even in our own denomination there have been instances where these matters have not been properly addressed. I know of a congregation in which it was found out, and made public, some 25 years after the fact, that one of their former pastors was convicted in the courts of abusing his own family members. As the story came before the courts it was found out that one instance of the abuse, took place while he was serving as their own pastor. Though the church may have had no way of knowing at the time, now many years later it was found out that while he served as their pastor, he was sexually abusing a family member. Not too long after this story had gone through the courts and been made public, the congregation celebrated it's 50th anniversary, and this former pastor was one of the guests in attendance on the front podium of the sanctuary.

That's one example of, no doubt many, in which victims are made to feel re-victimized.

Church leaders must deal openly with issues of present and past abuse so that the secret can be exposed, the sins confessed and healing can take place.

I'm thankful that in 2 ½ weeks time our church council, all elders and deacons, and volunteer ministry leaders are being given the opportunity to go through a Safe Church Training workshop so that we can better understand this issue and strive towards its prevention.

I told you that this would be a difficult sermon. But I believe in all my heart that this message can bring much needed liberation and healing.

Why bring this up???. Why tell these kinds stories? It's because, as Ezra teaches us, sin needs to be exposed. A holy God wants to rest and dwell in the midst of a holy people.

Think of stories told in the Bible, stories of our "forefathers"—we wish they weren't told—stories of Abraham lying about his wife, telling the king that she was his sister, stories of the great prophet Moses who in an outburst of anger smashed a stick against a rock to bring forth water, stories of the great King David who committed sexual "abuse" and slept with the wife of his general. Stories of great King David, who in a moment of proud insecurity issued a census that all of the people in his kingdom be counted to see how strong he was, as if strength depended on the numbers of people and not on the Lord himself. We wish those stories weren't told. But God chooses to tell them. He chooses to tell them so that sin can be exposed and so that the community can experience healing.... So that the community can experience forgiveness.

Because that's where, we pray, the story ultimately goes. Towards forgiveness.

Admittedly the journey towards forgiveness for a victim of abuse is often a long and difficult journey. But I believe with the power of God, it's a journey that can be completed.

And with forgiveness and reconciliation, often comes consequences. Moses wasn't permitted to enter the promised land. The son of Bathsheba was not permitted to live. Thousands of people in David's kingdom died as a result of a plague because of his act of arrogance and pride.

Clergy that abuse need to be deposed. Perpetrators need to be hemmed in so that they can't repeat.

Forgiveness can come, and maybe even on this side of heaven, genuine reconciliation, but consequences come too.

The end of the story must always strive for forgiveness.....

I began saying God has provided a means for forgiveness.... “behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

With the presence of God in our midst; a holy presence, but also a deeply loving and merciful presence, God can effect healing. As that sin is exposed and confessed, a deep sense of community can be restored again.

As GOD is welcomed to dwell more fully into the lives and hearts of his PEOPLE....as SIN in the community is dispelled and the Spirit of the Living God is able to work more fully to heal and transform and strengthen and encourage... the great LIGHT and JOY and LOVE and HOPE and PEACE of the ONE TRUE LIVING GOD will fill us more and more. We will experience even more fully how DEEP and WIDE and LONG and HIGH the love of God is for us in CHRIST JESUS. And we will increasingly become a TANGIBLE DISPLAY OF GOD’S RENEWING POWER, to bring unity and make things right. That renewing power is none other than the power of God to bring blessing and hope and healing.

God says “I love you. You are my people. Be holy because I am holy.”

Let’s pray.