

# Safe Congregations

Pastor Cynthia Lapp

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II Samuel 13

Matthew 3

It was early 2007; we were in the midst of a pastoral transition. Our interim pastor asked whether we had a child protection policy as a congregation. The church council blushed collectively and said that we did not. Soon the pastorate appointed a group to create such a policy; we do care deeply about the children in this congregation. Yet after five years of meetings we still don't quite have a finished policy.

Perhaps instead of "Safe Congregations" this sermon would more accurately be titled, "Hard topics we would rather not talk about in church." In fact, this is the first in a September series of sermons on "things we would rather not discuss in church." Next week – poverty, then vengeance and finally another one on money.

I want to make clear from the start that the impetus for our discussion and process was not the result of any particular incident of abuse in this congregation. Rather this stems from an acknowledgment of the reality that "nationally, one out of every four females will or has experienced some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime as will one out of every six males. The most vulnerable populations to this type of abuse are children and youth" (from HMC Safe congregation policy, August 2012 version). We know that while the worship space is called a "sanctuary," houses of worship can sometimes be secretive and dangerous. Witness the crisis in the Catholic Church. Of course Protestants, Jews and Muslims are not immune to these kinds of abuses of power. Within every religious tradition there are those who abuse power, even among Mennonites. Sometimes that abuse is sexual, sometimes it is emotional or physical and sometimes it is spiritual abuse.

We have learned again from the crisis at Penn State University that it is not only religious authorities that turn a blind eye to abuses of power. At a training on this topic that I attended this past summer it was horrifying to learn just how broken the educational, legal, social service and policing systems are when it comes to protecting children and others who are vulnerable from abuse.

Lest we forget our history and think that this is a uniquely 20th and 21st Century problem, we need only turn to the Bible. In II Samuel, we are reminded that abuses of power, lust and rage have always been part of the human experience.

The incident as described in the passage from II Samuel this morning happens not in a religious or educational institution but in a family. It is not an isolated incident; it does not develop out of thin air. It is a case of "like father, like son." Amnon's father is King David, who "took" what was not his to take when he saw beautiful Bathsheba. In II

Samuel, chapter 11, David sees Bathsheba bathing and as he is the king, he uses his power to have her brought to him so that he may “lay” with her.

It is only two chapters later that we read that Amnon, David’s son, is tormented by the beauty of his half-sister, Tamar. Amnon does not have the authority that his father David has, so he must use trickery instead of sheer power to get what he wants. After Amnon violently “lays” with Tamar, he is filled with hatred for her and forces her to leave his sight. In doing this, he shames her even further.

The scandal is not just that Amnon violates Tamar and the law of Israel, but when Tamar cries and ritually mourns her pain and disgrace she is told to be quiet. Her brother Absalom tells her to stop brooding over the episode. And while Absalom and their father, King David, are angry with Amnon for what he has done to Tamar, neither David nor Absalom even talk to Amnon about the situation. David does not punish his beloved first born son, Amnon.

One might wonder why this violent and horrific story is included in our holy text. Aren’t we to be uplifted by what we read in the Bible? Instead of encouragement we witness that sexual abuse and the violent abuse of power happen even in royal, God-chosen, families.

Perhaps one positive thing we can say about this story is that Tamar has a name, she is not anonymous like so many other powerless women in Biblical stories. Tamar is named and remembered. Her brother Absalom names his own daughter Tamar, after his shamed and abused sister.

Would it be better to rewrite history by erasing David’s sin from the story?

Would it be more honorable to leave Amnon out of the text?

Should we revise our own stories by covering up the abuses that have occurred in our families and churches?

Should the statue of Joe Paterno not have been removed from the campus of Penn State?

Is it better to remember how we lionized a flawed human being or to demote them so that we raise ourselves above their sin?

And who is really served by our omissions?

It is because Tamar is named — not hidden — that we can begin to understand that we must not replicate the actions of Amnon, Absalom and David. We must call each other by name. As followers of the Prince of Peace, the one who called children to himself, we must stand guard over those who are vulnerable and do not have power.

We are a relatively small congregation. We do not grant a lot of power to the pastor, much less Sunday School teachers, nursery workers or youth sponsors. We know everyone, almost. An abuse of power couldn’t happen here. Why do we need a formal policy and procedure manual to keep our children safe?

In some ways this will not be a huge stretch for us. Part of the way we do church already shows our care and helps protect children. We know the names of the children

and who their parents are. The list of children and their Sunday School classes in the bulletin today is one way that we take seriously our commitment to the children of this church.

Our proposed safe congregation policy asks us to always have at least two adults present for activities for children and youth. Remarkably this year we have five youth sponsors for the senior youth and four sponsors for the junior youth. We always have at least two adults in the nursery on Sunday mornings. When we can't manage to have more than one adult in a classroom, we will keep the door to the classroom open. The renovations to the building on East-West Highway include, by recommendation of the safe congregation committee, a half door for the restroom in the nursery so that young children have privacy but adults helping them will be visible.

Some of what our policy asks of us will be simple. But we will need to remind ourselves of our commitments. Part of keeping our children safe will be training ourselves in the safe congregation policy and procedures. We will ask that all church staff and everyone who works with children receive an initial training and then periodic updates. This may seem cumbersome at first, but we will get used to new procedures.

The most difficult thing for me, and I think for many of us in congregational leadership who have been working with this, is the background check. To be fair to each other, to be consistent in keeping our children safe, we will have some kind of background check for church staff and adults who work with children and youth. The reality of having fingerprints taken or submitting our names for criminal background checks seems intimidating. This could get expensive not to mention that the recordkeeping could be awkward.

But there is another set of questions that background checks raise. Will background checks really give us the information we need? Will we begin to look at each other with suspicion? Will we lose our sense of community and the trust we have for each other? Will that effect how we interact with the children, or our willingness to volunteer for positions working with children?

I am reminded of a story that I heard musician and theologian John Bell tell one time. He was visiting a village in South Africa where the infection rate of HIV/AIDS was very high. As part of responding to the community, the local church was recommending that everyone be tested for HIV/AIDS. John Bell saw no need to get tested himself. He is a celibate priest. He did not live there, he was just visiting. He knew that he could not be positive for HIV. And yet the request was for everyone to be tested, the local priests, the visiting priests, the congregation members, the villagers.

It happened that the scripture that Sunday was the baptism of Jesus. The gospel of Matthew gives us John the Baptist as fiery preacher. We are told all Jerusalem, all Judea and the whole region around the Jordon River comes out to the river to be baptized. John really lets the Pharisees and Sadducees have it. "Don't pride yourselves on the claim, 'Sarah and Abraham are our parents.' I tell you God can raise children for

Sarah and Abraham from these very stones.” And he goes on, “The grain will be gathered into the barn, but the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire.”

With a warning like that why would anyone approach? And yet out of the crowd comes Jesus. John the Baptizer sees Jesus. John says he should step back, it is not necessary for Jesus to be baptized, to receive waters of forgiveness and cleansing. But Jesus insists, and he is baptized by John.

Bell says he understood in a new way that day that Jesus was part of the human community. Jesus did not need baptism, but as part of those serious about seeking the reign of God, as one who points the way to God, Jesus chose to step in line and be baptized along with everyone else.

And so it was that John Bell was tested for HIV/AIDS in a small village in South Africa. He did not need to be tested, but as part of the healing community seeking the reign of God he stood in line with the others.

When I get nervous about what it might mean for all of us to line up for background checks I remember John Bell and Jesus. We do not have anything to hide; we don't even need to get checked. But because we are part of this community committed to safety for our children, because we are part of this community committed to bringing healing and hope to the world, we are willing to step up and stand in line.

This is not the end of the story with our safe congregation policy. The committee is still striving to make sure that what we have researched and written is workable. We want to make sure that this policy can be implemented, not all at once, but gradually over several years. We will keep you informed as we continue to move forward.

It is certainly not the end of the story for those who have been abused or who may be abusers themselves. If hearing this sermon today raises painful memories for you in such a way that you want to talk to someone, I hope you will find me or someone else who will listen. You are loved and part of us, and we pray healing for you.

It is not the end of struggles with power, with sin and silence. Our human journey is not finished. But it is our commitment to peace and following in the way of Christ that leads us to say in the Safe Congregation Policy:

We will continue to seek the Spirit as we strive to create and sustain a community of safety for all at Hyattsville Mennonite Church.