

Recollected: On Abuse

Introduction:

So today we're talking about abuse. April is Child Abuse Prevention month, and with this quarantine, we know, the situations that give rise to abusive behavior have grown in opportunity, if not in reality.

And I can't know what even the mention of the topic brings to mind for any one of us, but it's probably something personal, maybe something secret--

--although that's funny, because if there's anything less secret than abuse, I don't know what it is. I mean, statistically, abuse is as common as garbage, which is pretty much what it tries to make of people. We'll talk about that in a second. Would you like some statistics? Numbers are nice, right?

Let's start there:

"1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 males will experience intimate relationship violence in their adult lifetime.

1 in 3 teens and young adults will experience abuse in a dating relationship. 16-20% of young women are sexually assaulted while in college. 1 in 4 teens are harassed or abused through technological means--something we're utterly

depending on as a society right now.

28% of marriages contain physical violence.

50% of marriages experience some form of abuse.

With regards to child abuse, 1 in 3 females and 1 in 5 males will experience abuse in their lifetime.

with regards to elder abuse....

over 2.1 million American elderly suffer abuse and neglect each year.”

(Source: Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, futureswithoutviolence.org)

And, as the Christian Coalition Against Domestic Abuse has put it,

“...Sadly, religion is NOT a deterrent... there is just as much abuse (spousal, child and sexual abuse) in Christian homes as in non-Christian homes.

In addition, Spiritual abuse is always a component of abusive behaviors in Christian homes and damages the abused person’s view of God.

And, these numbers don't "...even include the other effects of suffering abuse, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, arrests, suicide attempts and many others."

So personal things, embarrassing things, because here is a lie: Let me lie to you: what we're talking about today is uncommon, abuse is an unusual thing, it rarely happens--and it never happens in the church, Christians never abuse or are abused. Lies! Lies, right--from the angry heart of Hell.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that many of the greatest failures in church history have not come from our inability to rally around some politicized thing, so much as our inability to name and stop abuse.

Today:

So today we're talking about the things we have to say about abuse. We'll talk about the world some; but not as much as we'll talk about ourselves. We'll look at what abuse is, we'll talk about ways we end up abusers, and what we're called to be and do instead, as Christians.

Definition:

Here's how I'd like us to understand abuse, if we can: As anything that dehumanizes a person. Alright? Dehumanizing behavior. Anything that dismisses and

destroys a person's basic humanity. All abuse, whatever form it takes, is at base the abuse of a person's humanity. And it gets played out in all sorts of ways, right? We know. Emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, psychological--*abuse*; we use these adjectives to describe the many avenues we have to plundering a person's humanity.

And nearly always, abusive behavior is wrapped up in domination. Those with power dominate those with less and so destroy their humanity. They flex their power over a person and make that person less human.

Abuse is power over another person that is used to steal and stifle what is human about that other person. Power used to steal and stifle.

How we end up there:

And let's start small, instead of go big, fast. Maybe instead of talking about the ways we straight up abuse people's humanity; we can talk about ways we misuse it. Ways we misuse people's humanity. Ways we just forget about what people are, and instead, we begin to accidentally take away their humanity.

And I don't know if there's a pathway to abuse; but I do know that if we become accustomed to misusing people then we have really positioned ourselves to become abusive people.

So; a few ways that we accidentally take away people's humanity, that is *misuse them*.

Stealing Humanity: Us & Them

First: We divide. We create divisions; and this is natural, I think, between Christians & people who aren't yet followers of Jesus. Because God says that Christians are "new creations," that there is something objectively different about people who have trusted Jesus and people who aren't. So I'm not talking about acknowledging differences here, right? People are different from each other, you're different from me, and we're both different from someone else; this is all reasonable. I'm talking about using the differences we have to take away someone else's humanity-- accidentally, of course. We do it like this: "Oh, he's a liberal." "She's a Catholic." "They're Muslim." And at the point when we do this, we are no longer talking about "liberal" people, "Catholic" people, or "Muslim" people. We are using these terms as labels that steal away the person's unique qualities, and instead, give them a label that we can disregard. We make them less than human, right? They are "the other," unlike us, and because they are unlike us, they are less than us--we who are people, unique and interesting and morally superior.

Whenever we create a "them," and put "them" outside us, fill "them" with all sorts of unarticulated stereotypes and generalizations that are usually negative, we destroy the humanity of whoever we toss

in that pot from that point forward. And who we put in that pot is anyone who has any quality we think of as “other.” They slip from “people” to “things,” to “them.”

Maybe we do other things.

Stealing Humanity: Tools

Maybe we turn people into tools. They are no longer people; they are things with utility, who exist only as long as we have a use for them; only as long as they are being useful. Their value, and importance, is only related to the utility we can gain from them; we can't even say we love them and leave them--unless, of course, we want to talk about the emotional high they provide for us, or maybe the sexual release, if we dare call that love.

In this case, people have value only insofar as they are useful. So the cashier at the grocery store; just a tool to get us through line, as fast as possible, without making us sick. The bagger who bags our groceries: not a person, a slow hindrance, a tool that isn't working quickly enough, or using too many bags. Broken. Pornography that presents us with a picture of a woman or man--no longer the image of God, but an image that we can use for a physical release, the same way an abusing spouse uses their partner for a release when he or she makes a mistake and decreases their utility. We could talk about celebrities and sport stars, who aren't really people, right? Are

they? Or are they simply tools for us to feel entertained by, useful for small talk. They are useful to us because their lives give us the pleasure of having something to chat about with strangers. And occasionally, we get the same sense of pleasure by chatting about the people we worship alongside. We could be more subtle, and think about how we value what people do in or with social media not because of the people they are but because of the utility they can bring us: keep us from loneliness, stroke our egos, stoke our sense of indignation. Whatever it is we're wanting from others as we post and share during this weird time.

Stealing Humanity: Trophies

Maybe we occasionally misuse people by making them markers of our own success and our own morality. They become trophies that we put on the mantles of our egos or salves we place on our consciences. It's not them that is important; not their person: What is important is that they made a decision because of our influence, they've come around to our way of thinking. What's important is that we were able to get them to believe what we believe, do what we do, feel what we feel, or any other thing; not that they *are*, that they are alive. We were able to get them to behave like we know is morally right; and when they have changed their lives because of us, we hold them in our heart like little trophies.

Again; it's not them that's important; it's us. We don't

care about them; we care about the decisions they make, and whether those decisions are good for us, are in line with ours, and if we can get credit for it. We don't even notice how we use our persuasion, how we manipulate or flex our power and our influence over people in order to get them to convert to our way of thinking--and the conversion to our perspective is what matters, not the person. And so we steal their humanity, caring more about how their decisions reflect on us, than about their lives.

Stealing Humanity: Other things

Maybe we make scapegoats of people. Placing our blame and hurt and responsibilities on them, and as we do this, stealing away the fact that we are all sinners and we all fail, that Jesus was the last real scapegoat for the world.

Maybe we make heroes of people; forgetting again that we are all sinners and we all fail, and stealing a person's humanity and replacing it with inflexible expectations of perfection is inhuman. We forget that Jesus was the last real hero, and even he pointed away from himself and pointed to his good Father in heaven.

Maybe we make judges of people; giving up our responsibility to make decisions about what is cool, or good, or worthwhile, and instead asking them to become our decider, and replacing their humanity with our need for ordinances, and beliefs, and opinions. We forget that Jesus will judge the quick and the dead.

Or maybe we even make other people responsible for our own happiness. Those around us become happiness-vendors who *must* make us feel better; people who *must* love us with a love that blinds and overwhelms our desperate insecurities and loneliness. We steal away their humanity until all they become are emotional vending machines, required to give and give and give to us a sense of worth and value. Yet we forget that we are all sinners and we all fail, and our sense of value and worth and emotional security must come from God's unshakeable love for us, which will last beyond the end of time.

Accidental Conditioning:

And with each accidental misuse we make of people, we are conditioning ourselves to become abusers, the same way an abuser conditions his or her family to walk quietly and not disturb them until he's had a beer. We become habituated to the idea of people as something other than people--as tools, heroes, "them," judges, scapegoats, trophies, or measures of our own success, our own goodness, our own value.

Every time that we accidentally treat a person as something other than a person, we chip at the damn that holds back our ability to resist becoming abusers of people. We become used to the idea of people who exist largely to meet our wants.

And many of us who are not outright abusers,

whatever else we are, find that when we step back we have accidentally misused people, gosh, even since the last time we met together, have accidentally dehumanized those around us.

What's "right use?"

But what are people for?

I mean, if they aren't for our entertainment, or to carry our blame, or provide us with meaning or value, if they aren't steps we climb up to satisfy our own dreams, what are they for?

We can't even really talk about use, can we? Because at base people aren't meant to be "used" at all; they are meant for something else. They are meant to receive God's love, through Jesus, and then shine it out into the world, right? The Bible points us to this in a thousand places:

Made to be loved:

We know that humans were first made to be in relationship with God, who "is love," that we were made in the image of God, and that even though we broke that relationship, God pursued us with love, longing to bless us and draw us back to him. We know that God showed his love for us by sending "his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:8-12) Paul tells us this same thing;

that while we were still sinners--apart from God--God pursued us and sent his son, who chose to die for us because of his love for us.(Rom 5:8). Jesus reminds us that he didn't come to condemn us, but to save us, and draw us back to the God who loves us. Paul, compelled by Jesus' love, longs to reveal to everyone that we're meant to live no longer for ourselves but for Jesus who died for humanity and was raised for humanity.

And we are supposed to be people who, as the light of the world, the light that reveals God's love for the world, do not hide ourselves away, but share with everyone that God loves them. Humans were made in God's image, out of God's love, and chased after for generations until they might be remade in the image of Jesus, who used up his breath loving them, so that they might know his love and bring others to it.

Called to an Alternative:

And it may be the case that to survive in this broken, dog-eat-dog world you had best flex your power, you had best evaluate the utility you can get out of people, and trade them like stocks and use them like tools. Maybe loving people because they are people, and God loves them, just isn't worth a person's time. Maybe that's true.

But not for us, not for we who are being and will be saved by God's love for us. Because into this world and its darkness shone a light that has not stopped

shining; and if we give into some “social-darwinistic, survival of the fittest, let the lame and the old ones die” pattern of living, we have failed. Because even if it were true that the only way to survive is to flex your power and look out for yourself, and in the process steal the humanity from everyone around you, so what? We Christians are not called to conform to the pattern of this world, and we aren’t even called to survive the world. We are called to love those who will not survive it unless we love them. We have only been called to faithfulness.

Into this world that we live in, James calls us to care for the orphan and the widow; the weakest members of society. Into this world God calls to his people to remember that they were aliens and foreigners in Egypt, and that they must be on the side of the alien and foreigner. Into this world the author of Hebrews reminds us that it is our responsibility to go outside the gates to the ones who are outside, go to “Them” right? The liberals and muslims and gays and lesbians, the ones with noisy radios and broken blinds in their windows and no home, and love them with the most practical love, as we have been loved with the most practical love, a saving love: A love that stands against the forces of evil and dehumanization in the world and instead names, and owns, and says I will protect you, no matter what. We are called to use our power so others--out there, "them" might experience the redeeming loving power of God.

Jesus says that to “love your neighbor as yourself” and “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” summarizes all God’s hopes for His people. He says that we fulfill these hopes by making people our neighbors when we proactively care for them as if they are us. That to take up the needs and concerns of people who are unable to meet their own needs is to do part of what will help us inherit eternal life.

We are called to be a people--Christians, little Messiahs--who take those who have been dehumanized, have had their humanity whittled away, and make them people again. We bring back to life those people who have had their life stolen.

Warnings & Promises:

But if we use our power to steal away the life of another, stop. “Look, the judge is at the door!” James reminds us. Paul reminds us that we reap what we sow, and if we sow to our flesh--shorthand for whatever stands against God’s desire for his people--we will reap corruption. If we misuse the people made in God’s image--and the people remade in the image of God’s son, new creation participants in the life of God--then beware, because Paul isn’t playing around when he says that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Abusers need to hear Jesus say that only those who do the will of his father will enter the kingdom of heaven, because they are strong words, and they need to be heard. We cannot steal people's humanity, cannot shrink their lives. And of course, we have the hope that our lives might change as much as Paul's or anyone's ever has, as we seek help, seek guidance and counsel and new life, and seek to walk in step with the Spirit of God that bears in us love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and goodness, and self-control.

And you, too: Hope.

And we abused, with dark shames. We are only as alone as our belief in the lies of our abusers. And they are lies, great large lies. Our shames are not our own; they are burdens cast upon us. Jesus wants to bear them; and we can be a church that bears them, too, and carries us as long as we need to be carried. If you have fears of being unclean and unfit for any good service; you have been washed in the blood of the lamb; and God will restore your soul. I started this morning with lies, that dehumanizing abuse is rare in the Church. But I want us to end with truth:

That God loves you. If you have been squeezed into a small place, your humanity and worth shaved off of you, and your heart thrown outside to be stamped on, know that Jesus knows what it is like to be thrown outside. It is where he died. But he died there so that we-you-would not have to. No matter what anyone has

communicated to any of you, by words or teases, by violences done against you, God loves you. And if your humanity--your purpose to be loved by God and love God back--was stolen from you by the very person who was supposed to show you love, then I am sorry; but they failed, not you. And God does care for you.

If we have the courage to ask someone to hold our hands or hold us as we face the secrets that diminish us, the shames that are common, but no less personal, then God can restore all that has been taken away from us. God can restore what has been taken from us, and give us as much of life as we want or are ready to take from Him--but if we want it, a fully, abundant life.

God can give us an existence that is full and healthy apart from the abusers in our lives. He can restore our souls, and bring goodness out of both us and the pain we have gone through or are going through--more than we could imagine.

No one asks to have their humanity stripped from them; and it is not their fault when it is. And God does not want that for us.

Conclusion:

We must rise up, and cover over the weak. Rise up and care for the broken. Offer the healing of God to those who have been treated like garbage, when they were made for glory. Offer healing to the ones you know who are being abused emotionally, teared apart

spiritually, their hearts and joys and loves stolen from them, and their lives diminished away. Use the power you have, if any, to lift those from their powerless places.

Notice those who seem weakened by abuse; those who speak ill of themselves, those who are afraid to share their opinions, those who are so passive that they almost disappear; or explosively angry. Notice those whose humanity is passing away before your eyes, especially your brothers and sisters that love you. Notice those who have changed from the way you knew them before, and offer them yourself: your strength, your hope, your listening ear, and the Spirit of God in you. I know we are a people of discernment; will we act on what we discern? Will we receive one another's love? What's remarkable about our moment in history is that sometimes we can see more clearly when we are physically distant from others than we can when we are blinded by presence. Who have you not heard from?

I pray it is never said of any of us that we have stolen the humanity from people and replaced it with something we have desired. I pray that we are a people who can confess their sin, and any shame they feel is covered over by our support of them. I pray that we are a place where those who have been abused, have had their lives whittled down and their hearts made small, are encouraged and loved, and kept safe from their abusers.

I pray we are like Jesus in every way. I pray we act on what we know with trust, and courage, and all the power of heaven behind us.