

# The Isolation of Abuse

## (Sermon 7 on the Song of Songs)

Yakov Smirnoff is a Russian comedian who came to the United States. When he first came to the States he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, “On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to my self, ‘What a country!’”

I was thinking of this story as analogous to the way some people look at relationships, particularly when it come to sexual relationships. There is a spirit pervasive in our culture that treats sexuality cheaply. All you need is a bit of chemistry and presto you have instant sex. This is the message that many of our teens are receiving in the popular culture where so many of their idols treat sex so casually. What they are learning is that sex is easy and available for the taking. But it is a frightening distortion that will in the long run make true intimacy so difficult for them to experience.

If we are to take our cues from Song of Songs chapter five, one of the message it presents to us is that sexual intimacy is not easily experienced. When we look at the text for this morning we hear another dream. It suggests intimacy can be difficult even for those who are deeply in love. In this dream the woman seems to show a kind of indifference to her lover's advance. There are two ways in which we can read these verses.

At the literal level they suggest that her beloved is outside the gate and is trying to open it for himself. However there appears to be a lock on the inside, which she must unlatch in order for him to enter. She goes and opens the gate only to discover he has gone.

### *Another Dream*

<sup>2</sup> I slept, but my heart was awake. Listen! my beloved is knocking. “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.” <sup>3</sup> I had put off my garment; how could I put it on again? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them? “My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. <sup>5</sup> I arose

to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. <sup>6</sup> I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone.”

So what at one level is a dream about the opening or not opening of a door, is at another level a dream about the consummation or not of the lovers' physical relationship. When at verse two the passage speaks of the beloved requesting she open to him, her feigning disinterest is alluding to intercourse. This is further enhanced when the words in verse four are seen in their larger Old Testament context. The word used here for hand is a euphemism for penis and the “opening” is a euphemism for the vagina. When it says at verse 5 ““I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved but my beloved had gone” it speaks of deep and mutual sexual desire and also about misunderstanding, loss and separation.””

This hesitation on the part of the woman perhaps seems surprising in light of the poem her beloved had addressed to her in chapter 4. We need to remember that she is having a dream here. Her ambivalence to open to her beloved sexually in the dream is perhaps due to other experiences she has had sexually. And the dream provides her a way to give voice to her pain. This pain not only stemmed from the experience she had in Solomon's bed where she was seen as nothing more than an object of his desire, but also resulted from other abuse. We read in verses 6b and 7:

“My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer.<sup>7</sup> Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls.”

She has also experienced abuse at the hands of the sentinels. It is interesting that they are called the sentinels of the walls. Those who physically, emotionally and sexually abuse others often want to keep their victims under their control. Locked up so to speak. They want them to think they are powerless and not free to leave. And if they do leave they threaten them with further harm.

In her dream state the woman of the song is able acknowledge the ways she has

been abused by other men. Not only was she beaten but she had her mantle taken from her. The mantle represents both her covering but her individuality. Those who treated her in this way disregarded her as a person and raped her. And although in the sequence of the dream this comes after the encounter with her beloved, perhaps it is here to tell us something about why she had difficulty opening up to him sexually.

She had been abused physically and sexually. Because of this, even though she wants to be sexually receptive to the man who truly loves her this is difficult to do because of what she has been through.

At this point in the Song of Songs the poem gives voice to a very painful subject that is so often hard to talk about that we deal with it in our dreams, if at all. The experience of sexual and physical abuse is something that I am sure some of you here have experienced. And it has left its scars on your life. Scars that make it difficult for you to trust others. Scars that have perhaps turned you into someone who has abused others. Scars that saw you leave the relationship, something that required great courage and finds you perhaps married to another. But because of the pain you experienced before you have had, or still do have, trouble opening up sexually to your spouse.

Even though the subject of sexual abuse is one that we don't often talk about, the Bible seems to give voice to just how pervasive it is. It is worth noting that Jesus in the Gospel passage for this morning describes the present time as “an adulterous and sinful generation.” We humans so readily abuse and misuse God's gift of sexuality. But Jesus came to bring healing to the sexually wounded. But this healing is not a quick fix as some would hope. There is no “just adding water” and the healing is accomplished. But as we take to heart what Jesus says about the Cross, we can, with time, come into a place where Jesus can touch and heal the places where we have been sexually abused. So to those who have been sexually and physically abused what do Jesus words mean to you when he says “Take up your cross and follow me?”

We must carry a cross to remind us that the abuser is not at the center of the Universe. Rather the Cross reminds us that Jesus is at the center. When you have been abused this can be hard to believe because the abuser has had so much power over us. Remember Jesus who is at the center is also the Jesus who suffered abuse. Indeed there is a parallel between the woman's description in

verses 6 and 7 with what we read in the Gospels about how Jesus was treated. Let me read them back to back:

“they beat me, they wounded me, those sentinels of the walls.”

Then in the Gospel of St. Mark we read:

<sup>19</sup> They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

For those who have been abused remember that the Lord Jesus experienced the abuse of those who thought they were more powerful than he was. Yet the abuser is the one who is really weak because they have no way to deal with the feelings that lead them to make the kinds of choices they do. Those who are abusers are caught in their own kind of bondage and evil that has no liberation.

For Jesus the suffering of Good Friday led through to the victory of Easter Sunday. But remember it was a victory whereby the disciples could still see the scars resulting from the Cross. For those recovering from abuse you too will carry with you the emotional and sometimes physical scars stemming from being violently treated. But because Jesus is the center and not your abuser, remember that with time the Holy Spirit can bring healing to those places of deepest pain.

Secondly those who have been abused must take up the Cross to remind them that they are responsible in part for the Cross that Jesus carried. I am aware that although compared with the abuse presented to us in the Song of Songs and what some of you have experienced that the abuse I experienced as a teen was mild. However I am also aware that out of the ways in which I was sexually violated as a teen my view of sexual intimacy was deeply impaired. It has been necessary for me to take responsibility for this and admit before my closest confidants my wrong attitudes and actions. Not by trying to excuse it because of what I had experienced at the hands of others but by admitting my own sin.

I am reminded that when Rembrandt painted his famous work of the crucifixion called “The Three Crosses” which now hangs in the Louvre in Paris he did something most unusual. Among the faces in the crowd beneath the cross, he

painted himself. That was his way of saying that he could not envision the crucifixion without admitting that he had a participation in it

Jesus does not simply want us to remember his cross as something he himself suffered on our behalf. If he did he would have simply said take up MY cross and follow me. Instead he told us to take up our own cross. I think by that he meant that I must so identify with the event of the crucifixion as to see myself in the story. It is not simply His story; it is our story as well. When we are able to see our role in this way then there can be further healing from sexual abuse. Why is this? It is because we are able to see how our view of sexuality has been distorted. By brining this distortion to the Cross we can find further healing as we learn to be honest before God and a person we can trust. Someone to whom we can go and confess our attitudes and behaviors, which although influenced by how we were abused, are now our responsibility to own.

As I said, there is no simple fix, no add water and we are healed. But by learning to see the abuse in light of the Cross we can sing with assurance these words: "How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure. How great the pain of searing loss, The Father's turns his face away as wounds which mar the Chosen one bring many sons and daughters to glory."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from the hymn "How Deep the Father's Love for us, sung prior to the reading of the Gospel this morning.