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Reflection—Domestic Violence Awareness Month

Oct. 28 - 29, 2017

May I propose a question? When you hear the word “LOVE”, as we just did in our Gospel reading, what comes to mind? When you hear the word “COMPASSION”, what images or feelings rise up in you? How does your heart, your spirit respond to these words? I imagine our responses would be as varied as all of us gathered here in this worship space, each with our own memories and stories that speak to us of love and compassion. Those stories and memories are important because they help to shape both our identity and our wellbeing. They also speak to us of right relationship, as do our scripture readings for this day.

In our first reading from Exodus we are reminded of the dignity of every person, especially the most vulnerable and seemingly insignificant among us. If they cry out to me, God says, I will hear them, because I am compassionate. And we are called to do the same, with no exceptions.

In our Gospel today we hear again the admonition to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves -- familiar words that we've probably heard for most of our lives that challenge us to right relationship not only when it's easy or feels good but most especially in times when we don't want to respond at all, or when our first impulse is to respond in anger, impatience, or perhaps even ridicule. Jesus' challenge to love others as we love ourselves calls us to integrity and wholeness; to justice and mercy.

But what happens when “love” becomes twisted; when “love” is used as an excuse by an intimate partner to control, intimidate, or harm another while claiming to love them? What happens to extended family members, friends, and even neighbors and coworkers who suspect that someone they care about is being abused or is an abuser?

Although victims of abuse live in a world of isolation, fear, and shame because of the terrible secret they hold, the ramifications of witnessed or suspected abuse have far reaching affects. It reaches out like a spider web, affecting not only the two people in that relationship, but others who care about them as well. These family members, friends, neighbors and even coworkers of both the victim and the perpetrator are

hurt as well, not only in their worry about what's taking place, but also in their sense of frustration and powerlessness to change the situation.

These are serious questions, so to that end we here at St. Raymond are dedicating this weekend to those suffering from the terrible pain of abuse. During this month of October, our church commemorates Respect Life month, and our nation observes Domestic Violence Awareness month, two areas which intersect critically because wherever belittling another, name calling, stalking, monitoring where the other is at all times or isolating them from family and friends, denying access to finances, making threats, slapping, punching, pushing, hair pulling, choking, or sexual violence occurs, life is neither affirmed nor respected.

Although happening behind closed doors, we know that in our neighborhoods and in our faith communities both women and men are abused physically, verbally, emotionally, and sexually by those who say they love them.

The World Health Organization has found that 1 in 3 women will experience physical and or sexual abuse by an intimate partner at some point in her life. In the United States 1 in 3 women and nearly 1 in 6 men have experienced intimate partner violence during their lifetime.

The Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence states that from July 1, 2016 to June 30th of this year, 44 of the reported domestic abuse incidents led to 61 deaths either by homicide or suicide.

These findings and their implications are staggering, aren't they? We may think that this occurs only in certain cultures or economic classes, but the truth is that intimate partner abuse cuts across all social, economic and religious groups and in both hetero and homosexual relationships. Children witnessing abuse in their homes are equally victimized and can often grow up to marry an abuser or will become abusers themselves and the cycle continues.

Many times, victims of domestic abuse are unaware that they are victims, especially where there is no physical violence. In actuality, intimate partner violence is defined as any pattern of behavior that uses physical, emotional, financial, spiritual and /or sexual abuse to control another person.

If there is anyone here today who is a victim or who suspects that you are a victim of domestic abuse, please know that you are not crazy, it is not your fault and you

deserve to be safe. No one is expected to live with abuse and you do not have to suffer in silence and secrecy because help is available.

And if there is anyone here who has come to the realization that they may be an abuser, please know that help is available for you as well.

In 1992 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter entitled **“When I Call for Help”** in which they write: (quote) “As Pastors of the Catholic Church in the United States, we state as clearly and as strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified. Violence in any form – physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal – is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. Finally, we emphasize that no one is expected to stay in an abusive marriage.” (unquote)

As the faith community of St. Raymond, may we continue to stand in support of those suffering silently, those secretly carrying the social stigma of abuse; those who feel isolated, alone, and so ashamed of what is happening they find it just about impossible to share the pain of their abuse.

Let us stress over and over again that victims of abuse did nothing to cause the abuse; it is not their fault.

Let us teach our children, both boys and girls, the elements of healthy relationships that respect the dignity of all persons.

Let us teach our teens and young adults the elements of healthy dating relationships.

Let the gentlemen in this community embrace the extraordinary potential they have to bring about positive change by not committing, condoning, or remaining silent about any form of violence against women **and most importantly**, teach their sons to do the same.

Let our faith community continue to be a place of safety and compassion for women and men who wish to share the pain of their current situation, or the pain of witnessing abuse in their childhood homes that still lives within their hearts today.

And may the candles we light this evening (morning) be a visible sign of our compassion for those living with the darkness of abuse. May St. Raymond continue

to be a safe place where those carrying this terrible burden may find light and hope, and even more importantly, support and assurance that they need not carry this secret alone any longer.