

2018-10-21 Domestic Violence: A Testimony

Domestic Violence: A Testimony

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Hello podcast listeners, this is Pastor Scott Austin. I wanted to give you a content warning for this week's podcast. In recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness month, we had a guest speaker at Artisan who is a survivor of domestic violence. In her sermon, she does mention her experiences of being abused by a parent and an intimate partner.

We did this because we believe that it's important to talk about this issue in church, where so often people are left to process their experiences alone, and in silence. But I know this is a sensitive topic, so if you need to press pause and listen later, or skip this message altogether, please feel free to do so. And if you find it helpful, you can also read the transcript of this message on our website. Just go to the series page for Fall Ordinary Time and you'll find a link in the details for the message from October 21. Thanks for listening, and I hope to talk to you soon.

[Voice of Pastor Scott in church]

I want to introduce to you this morning's special guest speaker once again in recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness Month we have invited Alli O'Malley who is the C.E.O. of RESOLVE Rochester, a local organization working to address domestic violence, to be with us today and to give a sermon which includes some biblical content as well as personal testimony, and Allie has generously agreed to be with us, and we're so glad to have you with us. Thanks again and we welcome Alli.

[Voice of Allison O'Malley]

Good morning. Oh my! Never had applause at church before—that's exciting. Well it is a pleasure to be here I'm just going to put this flat so that my water doesn't tumble down on me here.

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My name is Alli O'Malley, and for ten years it's been my distinct privilege to be the C.E.O. of RESOLVE of greater Rochester, which is an organization dedicated to preventing violence specifically against women, but in general we believe that violence against all people is not OK, particularly in the context of family, and that's where we focus our work

I was called to this work because of my exposure to it. The first 25 years of my life were defined by domestic violence. I am one of many who have broken the cycle of violence and abuse in my life and it is my hope that my story will help you to understand a bit more about this complicated issue and how important faith can be for some people to heal and thrive.

Today, I will try to help you understand what it is like to live with domestic violence; how it feels and how it affects you. I will spare you most of the horrible details of what I endured; but what I hope you come away with is a new perspective on realities of domestic violence and compassion for those who are now or have ever endured it.

Paul's words to the Corinthians beautifully express what Christ-like relationships require, *"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united, with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing of the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete, by being like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and one in mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."* Christ's love as described in this text is the antithesis of domestic violence.

The abusers in my past, my father and my ex-husband, were men struggling to establish their place in the world. Each had a difficult childhood, were tormented by relationships with their own fathers, and they entered adulthood with something to prove.

This is a common theme among domestic violence perpetrators – no matter if they are male or female. Their need to exert power and to control every aspect of their lives, including their partners and often their children, is typically motivated by fear and a deep sense of inadequacy and shame. Inside almost every violent or abusive partner is a scared child that has felt the pain of rejection or abuse and is desperate for love and connection. Sometimes, perpetrators are struggling with mental illness or addiction too; but as unfortunate as these realities may be, domestic violence is never justified – not even in scripture, despite popular belief.

People who enter relationships with perpetrators do not know what is lurking below the surface; by the time the abusive behavior becomes recognizable the victim is trapped in a complex web like that of a fly to a spider.

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One of the most common myths about domestic violence is that once the couple separates, the problem ends. I believe that this myth is what makes people ask, “why doesn’t he or she just leave?”

Having grown up in a home with domestic violence, then being coerced into marrying my high school boyfriend at the age of 19; I can tell you that domestic violence is not just a series of incidents. It is impossible to “just leave”. Yes, a person can leave temporarily or move out, but it takes more than changing an address to end a relationship.

Domestic violence defined who I was and how I existed in the world. My life was not mine. I lived for those who abused me. Every choice I made was calculated to please them; because when they were okay, I was okay. The needs of my father and ex-husband, preoccupied my mind, tore at my heart, and informed my world view.

It is difficult to explain to people who have only known healthy relationships what domestic violence is like. A colleague of mine once described domestic violence perpetrators as domestic terrorists. Not the kind we hear about in the news that make bombs and target people they don’t know; but the kind who use their hands, their words, and their actions as weapons to terrorize their partner and their children... often under the guise of love.

Perpetrators are not constantly abusive or violent either, which is why it can be so confusing when you’re in the middle of it. In the moments when the perpetrator is feeling secure, they can be loving and endearing, charismatic and charming; and for the victim, those moments offer hope that things are getting better. Perpetrators will also expose their vulnerability to their partners and in these tender moments, the victim is often pulled in and is rewarded for extending empathy and compassion. This mixture of good and bad leaves the victim off balance and causes them to question themselves. It is truly crazy making.

My father was an executive at Kodak, a deacon in our church, a member of the Rotary and the first one to volunteer his skills in woodworking or videography to anyone who asked. Our home was meticulously maintained and he left the house every day in a three piece suit. Behind this carefully crafted façade, was a profoundly wounded man. He did not know how to love without conditions and his every action was motivated out of a mixture of self preservation, ambition and his own interests. Dad would tell anyone willing to would listen that family was the most important thing in his life, and he believed it; but his unresolved childhood wounds made him Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. By the time I was 6, the façade crumbled. My mother threatened to leave him, so he filed for divorce against her. They were in court for years, literally. His greatest fear had come true and in his utter humiliation, he set out to prove that he was the victim.

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With my mother out of the picture, he became fixated on me. We were so enmeshed that he did not know where he ended and where I began. Through his eyes, my every imperfection was magnified and, more importantly, reflected poorly on him. I was never good enough. I earned love when I performed well in public and made him look good. At 16, I left his home and moved in with my mother.

But the damage was already done. It's hard for children to understand divorce, even more so when one parent attempts to poison the children against the other. At the age of 7, my father blamed me for not receiving primary custody of us. As a teen, he humiliated me publicly and privately in an effort to prove that my failings were not his fault. He held me responsible for his happiness and because it was impossible for me to make him happy, I learned that I was inadequate and believed that I was utterly un-loveable. I carried these wounds into adulthood, so it's really no surprise that I went from the frying pan into the fire.

Both of my parents attended church regularly. In 8th grade, I was confirmed in the Presbyterian Church and Baptized in the Baptist Church. With so much instability in my home, I found comfort and strength, even as a child in my relationship with God. I recall the protective presence of a loving God around me, even as a little girl. As a teen, I was very active in my youth group and the adults in that setting were a lifeline to me. Through my youth group, I learned more about experiencing faith. I came to believe that the quiet voice I would hear in my darkest moments -- that was so different from the harsh, critical tone of my regular "self talk" -- was my connection to Spirit.

While I had support in youth group, I was desperately seeking acceptance and love. I met Tom, my first serious boyfriend who would become my husband, shortly after moving in with my mother. In spite of the trouble I had at home, I was a good girl. I did well academically, navigated well socially, and was active in theater and music. I also had a job, which is where we met. We were the same age but traveled in different social circles; he was a bad boy and being with him was an act of rebellion. He treated me like a queen; nobody had ever treated me with such kindness and adoration. He was a hot head and very jealous, but he was never angry or hostile with me. Our co-workers thought we were great together and that I really helped him; they said that I had "calmed the wild beast." My mother loved him because he doted on me and was so protective. His family life made mine look easy and our shared struggles were the glue that bound us together.

Tom was sure that I was "the one" and that we would be together forever. I wasn't so sure and after dating for 18 months, I tried to break up with him on two different occasions. Each time I

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found him hanging. I was terrified and believed that if I left him, he would die. I never told anyone, I truly believed that I was trapped.

We married when I was 19 and were together for 5 years. Immediately after our vows, the violence he once directed inward was aimed instead at me. To everyone looking in at us, things looked great. We were both gainfully employed; and by the time we were 22, we had two cars and when I turned 23 we bought our first home. From a societal expectations standpoint, we checked all the boxes, in fact it looked like we were beating the odds.

But behind closed doors, like my father before him, I was responsible for his happiness. It was an impossible situation. In public he was a devoted husband but in private, he berated me endlessly, I couldn't do anything right; but at the same time, he couldn't live without me. While he didn't batter me, he was too smart to leave a mark on me, he raped me repeatedly when he was angry at me or when he came home drunk. And other than going to work, I wasn't allowed to leave the house without him. After we bought our home, he came home one day with a shotgun. He claimed it was to protect our property, but the only thing he ever lined up in its sights was me. When I realized that I was pregnant, he was elated, but I was devastated. In private, I prayed to God through my tears, "Please help me... ."

I had a miscarriage. He was furious and blamed me. Knowing that I had asked God for help, I felt guilty and I fell into depression. He let me go to therapy, "because I was crazy and needed to get myself together". I'll never forget the day my counselor looked at me with concern and said, "Do you know that what you are describing is abuse?" I can honestly say that I didn't. In fact, what she called abuse, I called love.

On that very day I began to question everything I had ever known about myself and the way I related to the world around me, but it was painful and things got worse before they got better. As I struggled to find my own voice in the relationship, the violence and abuse escalated. After a particularly heinous weekend, where I was forcefully held captive in our home and not allowed to sleep for 36-hours, I attempted suicide. Fortunately, he called an ambulance and shortly thereafter I found the courage to get out of the marriage. It took about 2 years and I left and went back to him 4 times in total.

I continued in therapy for over a decade and was diagnosed with post traumatic stress and depression. I learned a lot of things about myself in therapy; the most important was to trust myself and my choices. I also realized that the quiet voice of spirit never left me, but I had stopped listening.

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When I ended therapy, I thought that I was finally free from the effects of the abuse both in childhood and in my marriage, but that was not to be.

When I remarried a few years later, my husband, Jim, was aware of my history and loved me anyway. We were excited to start a family. We got pregnant quickly, but I had 4 miscarriages. After the 4th, repressed memories of my father using my body for his comfort, as he was divorcing my mother, surfaced in nightmares. It was a betrayal like no other.

Jim stood by me through it all and never wavered. He was – and continues to be – my rock and my partner. In fact, we celebrated our 20th anniversary this past May. Eventually, we had two beautiful children, a son and a daughter. I found myself overwhelmed by the gifts God had given us.

A parent's love for a child is a love like no other and as the power of that love grew within me, so did the intensity of my anger toward my father. It was terrifying and it caused me to keep my own beautiful family at arms' length. I did not feel worthy of them and was afraid to accept their love for fear that my husband was going to wake up one day and decide that they all deserved better than me.

I returned to my therapist, who suggested it may be time to explore forgiveness. I immediately thought, "What?!?! You're crazy! How do I forgive of the unforgivable? Why should I let him off the hook? He needed to repent for his trespasses! I didn't need to forgive.

My anger was justified and righteous. I also realized that I had stopped listening to that quiet, gentle voice of Spirit within me because I was mad at God for allowing this to happen. What kind of God could ever allow this?

Eventually, my therapist explained that forgiveness does not make it okay, but would allow me to release the tether that bound me to my father. It took some time, but I eventually warmed to that possibility. He was already out of my life, but I thought about him endlessly and blamed him for everything. Our connection was more than a tether, it was a noose and with every passing day, it grew tighter around my neck. As today's old testament lesson said, "The parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge".

Desperate for help, I turned to my pastor. Forgiveness was bigger than me and I knew it was going to take a miracle. We met several times and he pointed me to scripture that helped me find peace. For another year, I prayed diligently, read the Bible daily, and wrote volumes in my journal following daily devotionals. I even went on a 22-day fast to purge my body of the toxic energy flowing through me. I began to understand what Jesus meant about forgiving our

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enemies. My heart and mind softened and I told God that I was finally willing to forgive, but did not know how.

Then, on Pentecost Sunday 2008, the answer came to me at church. As our Pastor finished the sermon, I picked up my hymnal. Then out of nowhere, I heard the words, “You were innocent and so were they”. I looked over my shoulder to see who had spoken to me, and person behind me was just singing enthusiastically. I wondered what these strange words meant and why I heard them. As we left church, I felt the emotions rising. The tears rushed forth like a flood. I was awash in grief.

Once the last tear fell, I realized that the tether had been released. I knew those words came from Spirit and were the path I needed to forgive. I immediately recognized my wounds, my father’s wounds, my ex-husband’s wounds, and that beneath our collective woundedness, we were all perfect children in the eyes of God doing the best that we could within the limits of our human experience.

The old testament reading continues, “Yet the Israelites say ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, People of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?”

In my humanity, there was no possibility of coming to forgiveness; but as God touched me with his Grace, the walls around my heart came down.

The passage continues with “Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and spirit”.

In the 10 years since this experience, by God’s grace, I have been set free. I’ve learned to give and accept love without conditions and the dark cloud of depression no longer hangs over my head. It is only as a result of this Grace that I can stand before you today and speak about my experience and lead an organization committed to break the cycle of domestic violence for individuals and communities.

RESOLVE offers non-residential transitional services to victims and survivors of domestic violence. We have a short-term counseling program, therapeutic groups, as well as community outreach and education. We see the issue of domestic violence as one of health and wellness, and we believe that every victim can grow through their experience and thrive in lives free from abuse. We are 100% privately funded and rely on the generosity of this community to deliver services to an average of 150 people – women, men and LGBTQ – each year. If you would like to learn more about us, donate or volunteer, please see me or check out our website, www.resolve-roc.org.

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Thank you for listening.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you so much Alli for a powerful and challenging and encouraging message—so grateful to you for being here with us today.

I want to invite all of you to come and to receive the sacrament of holy communion. Our table at Artisan is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus—himself the wounded healer. So you can come to the table and take a piece of the bread, remembering Christ's body which is broken for you. Dip it in one of the cups, remembering Christ's blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins, and you can take that in one piece here at the table. If you come up through the middle aisles and go out through the outer aisles that will make the thing flow nicely.

There's a member of our prayer team at the back of the room who'd be happy to pray with you in person right now, if you'd like to receive prayer. And as Shannon and Sean continue to lead us in singing, I encourage you to respond in whatever way the Holy Spirit is speaking to you today. Our table is open. Come if you will.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com