

Excursus: Not So Happy Valley  
Power, Abuse, Leadership and The Gospel of Jesus Christ  
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First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, PA  
November 13, 2011

Isaiah 1:12-17 and Matthew 18:1-6

By the sermon title you notice that we are going off-series this morning. This Sunday's sermon was originally reserved for part ten in our series on *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Worship and the Peace-Filled Life* but instead, will now focus on some pastoral and theological reflections that have emerged for me in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal at Penn State University. At the outset of such a reflection we would do well to recognize the emotionally charged nature of this story. My hunch is that a good number of you are either Penn State graduates or have children or other family members who are currently enrolled or have graduated from the school over the years. We reached out on Thursday via Facebook to seventeen students we know from the church who are currently at Penn State, making them aware that we are praying for them and available to process anything they are experiencing in the shadow of this tragedy. From a personal perspective, my younger brother David attended university in Happy Valley, he lived in State College; he met his wife there, and he, like some of you, has a strong affinity and loyalty to the school, its history, and its football team. In addition, Katie and I have a family friend who is a current member of the Board of Trustees at Penn State who is right in the thick of it; making very difficult decisions which two weeks ago would have seemed unfathomable. What I am trying to say in this prelude is that all of us, including me, engage this narrative with varied emotions; with diverse thoughts because of the certain commitments or relationships or experiences we possess that shapes how we interpret what has happened and how we should move through it.

Now some might wonder, "Why is this story important enough to redirect this preacher away from an ongoing sermon series?" Does such content deserve homiletical reflection? It may serve Twitter and the Blogosphere and the 24 hour news-cycle well; it may make for good water cooler conversation, but is it appropriate for a sermon? I think that is a good question. As I have processed this story, as I have prayed through it, as I have even cried through it, I have come to the conviction that the Gospel has something to say in at least three specific ways. I would like to offer these three ideas, introducing them one by one, in the form of declarations: things that the church is able to say; things that the church should say – things that the church has to say because it offers something unique, something no other institution or agency or group can offer. The church must speak into the confusion, heartbreak, anger, and sadness of such a story with truth, love, and some measure of Good News.

**First Declaration: The Church Stands with the Oppressed and Victimized because God Stands with the Oppressed and Victimized**

I imagine for those in the room who have experienced abuse in your own life, stories like the one that has come out of Penn State do not land all that easily for you. If we just take the low number regarding the percentage of individuals who have suffered this type of abuse – statistics tell us about 20-25% of the population report they themselves have suffered this – it’s safe to say that around 200 people who worship on our campus this morning would fall into that category. That is a huge number and it is a devastatingly sad number. I have thought a lot and prayed hard for those in our congregation whom I know and whom I don’t know that carry the scars of abuse. Those individuals who may or may not even have begun a journey toward healing and hope. Having to hear the evil details of this case; having heard the descriptions; learning that people in power refused to act in a sufficient way may indeed conjure up in those individuals feelings associated with their own abuse: feelings of powerlessness, violation, lack of safety, loneliness, vulnerability, and fear. Revisiting one’s personal trauma is not a pleasant experience, especially if it has remained a secret...if no one but you carry the abuse.

This morning, I want to declare something to each person who has suffered: the church stands with you because God stands with you. God shows a preferential disposition toward you in that God knows what it is like to be the victim even as God was abused, tortured, and killed in and as the person of Jesus Christ. You don’t have to go at it alone. We are here to walk with you and get you the support you need. The pastoral staff and other staff members and church leaders stand with you. We follow the lead of the prophet Isaiah: we do justice, we rescue the oppressed, and we care for the least of these – including the abused, the victimized, and the silenced. This is a commitment I am making on behalf of our leadership for those whose voice is muted: we are ready to hear your story and we will do our very best to get you the support and encouragement you need for your journey toward healing.

### **Second Declaration: The Church is Committed to the Flourishing, Protection, and Holistic Growth of Children**

It was a conversation with our Director of Mission, Chris Cocca, which the Spirit used to convince me to change directions this week. As we were talking on Wednesday, the scripture verse from Matthew 18 hit me like a ton of bricks: *“if any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”* Little ones is not just about chronology – it is not just about children; it is also about the weak and the powerless. The gravity of such words is inescapable in light of the accusations to come out of Penn State. Not only were little ones (chronologically speaking) taken advantage of but also little ones (in terms of their powerlessness) were subjugated to indescribable horror. Even still, those in the most powerful of positions failed the powerless. Period. Because of their passive inaction little one after little one was allegedly subjugated to abuse.

Because of texts like these and the call that is placed upon us to advocate on behalf of the weak – after all, God is the defender of the weak says Isaiah in the fortieth chapter – we are

committed to providing safe places where kids can grow and flourish in their faith and life. It is why we commit to a weekday preschool. It is why we invest so much in our children and youth ministry. It is why we have a standing committee of Session and ministry called Safe Sanctuaries which guarantees that every adult working with our children has been legally cleared and has been trained in abuse prevention. Safe Sanctuaries creates an environment of safety for our children, parents, teachers, and volunteers – it creates a culture that would refuse to sweep impropriety or abuse under the rug. I am proud of that ministry. I am also proud of the way individuals in our church are advocating for these “little ones” out in the world. I am proud of our Social Workers like Laurie Boucher; our multiple psychologists, counselors, and school professionals that are members of FPCA; these individuals who do the heavy lifting for children and families in our city and county dealing with these issues. I am proud to say that Bill White is a member of this church whose journalistic integrity and excellence with the Morning Call has continually, over a long period of time, highlighted the horrors of abuse and ways in which we can prevent it. I am proud to say that Rep. Jennifer Mann is a member of this church who has worked tirelessly to bolster victims’ rights in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania through changes in the law. I am proud to say that Attorney Jane Davenport is a member of our church. A chunk of Jane’s work is advocating through the court system ways to protect children who are victims of abuse, to get them out of those situations, and place them in safe homes. There are many more names we could add to this list. Make no mistake, both inside of these walls and outside of them, we are working and advocating and we will continue to work and advocate for the weak and powerless.

Right now, I would like to say something to the children in the room; to the little ones. Jesus loves you. Your church loves you and if anyone has ever physically hurt you; if anyone has touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable or scared, that is not OK. Your body belongs to God and to no one else and no matter what that person has said to you, it is not OK for them to hurt you. Pastor Lindsay was telling me this week about a part of Harry Potter that may help us understand what I am trying to say. In Book Five, Order of the Phoenix, Harry is being punished by Delores Umbridge, one of the professors at Hogwarts. Harry didn’t do anything wrong but Delores Umbridge doesn’t care! She just wants to hurt Harry. She makes him go to detention and casts a spell on his pen so that when he writes *I must not tell lies* on the paper, it actually cuts those same words – like a knife – into his skin. She makes him bleed. She makes Harry do this for days in detention and Harry doesn’t tell any adults what she is doing to him.

Now there are a lot things we can look up to about Harry Potter – he loves his friends, he is courageous, he cares about his school – but there is one way I don’t want you to be like Harry Potter: if anyone is hurting you or has hurt you or has touched you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, don’t be like Harry Potter! I want to invite you to tell a safe adult. It may be that the person who is hurting you actually told you not to tell anyone or to keep it a secret: that is a

lie. I would invite you to tell a safe adult – you could tell me or another pastor or a different adult you know you can trust – so that we can help protect you and keep you safe.

### **Third Declaration: The Church Confesses that Jesus Christ can Redeem Our Brokenness**

It was my wife, Katie, who first brought to my attention the ways in which the innocent victims of this tragedy; those young boys, were being described in the various media and communication outlets. Over and over we read and heard, “Their lives are ruined.” It has been implied that these boys are damaged goods. They are described as being irreparably broken. What Katie and I bear witness to, from Katie’s personal experience and from our ministry walking with men, women, and children who have been abused is this: while abuse causes immense emotional, psychological, and spiritual damage; and while these scars never fully go away, healing is possible for victims of sexual abuse. In fact, we have witnessed time and again God’s healing presence in the midst of inexpressible horror.

There is a great danger in the language of “damaged goods” or “ruined lives” because it actually perpetuates the problem of secrecy often associated with abuse. If a kid or an adult for that matter hears that abuse means you’re ruined or damaged, then why would they want to tell anyone and expose themselves as “less than.” This is a unique opportunity for the church to say, “No!” You are not less than! You are not damaged goods! You are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139) and the God who made you and loves you can redeem even the most horrific tragedies of our lives.

Isn’t that what the Gospel is all about? Jesus Christ, God incarnate, is abused, tortured, and killed. He keeps silent on the cross not to model for us that we should keep silent when we are abused but exactly the opposite. To understand the cross we must look at it through the lens of resurrection which is where we find God **speaking** to the powers of abuse and terror. “Your way is not the way of God and it has no future! I have overcome the way of power and abuse by having the angels declare, ‘He is not here! He is risen! He is alive!’” God breaks the silence of abuse, breaks the silence of torture, and breaks the silence of death in the resurrection of Jesus! It is this unique witness that gives voice to those who have long been silent in their own personal hell. That is the message we declare as a church: we say to all who have been victimized and oppressed, “Jesus is alive! God raised him up and God can raise you up too! God can redeem the treacherous things that were done to you as you open yourself to God’s love and God’s people who will care for you and bring into your life the healing you need.

This Good News is also for the perpetrators of such deplorable acts. If there are people within the sound of my voice who are indeed putting stumbling blocks before these little ones, I say to you – in the words of the prophet Isaiah – “Stop doing evil!” You are invited to share your story. I am ready to listen and get you the help you need to heal and protect those “little ones.” No one is beyond redemption. The victim and the victimizer can both be healed by the grace of Jesus Christ.

The church is not called to do the minimum – we go the second mile. The church is called to be a leader – a herald – a witness to the unique message we bear: God can take tragedy and turn into triumph; God can take brokenness and heal it; God can take a crushed and dead spirit, and make it alive again. May we continue to stand with the victim because God stands with the victim! May we continue in our unwavering commitment to the flourishing, the protection, and holistic growth of children! May we confess and declare that Jesus Christ can redeem our brokenness...for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the world! Amen!