

I want to start today with sharing an image. This is an image of a painting by Simon Silva which was given to me following the birth of our second child. This wall poster hangs above my bed as a gentle reminder for me as a parent. The image is of a mother embracing her infant child, looking out the window to the greater world that her child will interact with now and into the future. On the wall is a cross and on the table a candle, which, for me, these objects represent faith and community. The words in Spanish that appear on the note read, "*Amor a todas horas*" - Love at all times. Each day I don't know what I will face with my child. I pray that my response and actions included love. When I lay to sleep at night I am again gently reminded of that task and think of the image as now being a sun setting on my day. How did I do at this task of loving my child? Was I angry? Impatient? Unkind? Too busy to listen? What new challenges, learning, crisis, or pain did we face today? Whatever reflections or answers emerge, hopefully, with God's grace I have the chance to try again tomorrow, doing the best I know how.

Doing the best **we** know how.

This morning I've been asked to share with you a little about a journey that I have had the privilege of being a part of, that of accompanying individuals and families through the healing process following abuse. The journey has included people that have experienced harm and healing within the church and outside in the greater community. I will do this through the sharing of some of the hard data, factual information, and to help the heart to be able to hear, I will share stories of the human spirit resilient and strong. We will talk about the faith community as being a place where we learn how to prevent abuse in all its forms. God knew about this journey long before we did. He knew when his son Jesus was walking on the road to Emmaus that there would be times in our lives where we need guidance from the Holy Spirit. Times when we feel so overwhelmed with pain and brokenness of this world that we have a hard time recognizing God's presence in our midst.

Let's listen again as the last part of the scripture as it is read.

So he went in to stay with them. After he took his seat at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other,

"Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?"

They got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying to each other, "The Lord really has risen! He appeared to Simon!" Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread.

The journey and teaching started to make sense when they began to tell the others what they had seen and what had happened.

The brokenness in our stories today revolve around abuse. Abuse is an action that intentionally harms or injures another person. Child abuse results when an adult or an older adolescent use their power and control in harmful ways, physically and/or sexually.

Child Abuse and neglect: It Impacts All of US

- 3.4 million reported cases of physical abuse or neglect in the United States each year (2015)
- Impacts children of all ages
- Young children are disproportionately represented
- One-third of all victims of child abuse were under the age of 4 at the time of the abuse
- 2015 1,670 children died of child abuse and or neglect (www.childwelfare.gov)

Have you ever watched the enthusiasm that a young child tries a new task or sees something in nature for the first time? Or the time and energy a teen puts in on social media -eager to be loved and accepted by others in spite of their differences? Children are dependent on their parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches, pastors to be safe people. But we know that breaking that trust happens even in the Church. We need to hold each other accountable. The Church needs to be a place where we work together to create an environment of respect and acceptance. The Church needs to be a place that is willing to respond when hurtful things happen. The Church needs to be a place where we know our safety extends beyond our church doors to caring about others and their experience of pain and injustice.

I offer two such windows: vulnerable youth who are homeless and families who are fleeing youth violence in Central America.

The Scope of the Issue

- The National Runaway Switchboard that on any given night there are approximately **1.3 million homeless youth** on the streets or staying with a friend or stranger.
- 1 in 7 young people between the ages of 10 -17 will run away.
- One study indicated that over 60% of runaway, homeless youth reported being sexually abused prior to leaving home.

System Gaps and Failures

- Between 20 -40 % of homeless youth identify as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender or Questioning (GLBTQ)
- The average length of a runaway episode for youth is 4-8 weeks.
- 25% of former foster children are homeless within 2 years of leaving the care of Child Protective Services.

We know that runaway youth in our communities are at great risk for harm. We also know that runaway and homeless youth are at great risk for intersecting with human trafficking. Research states that 90% of runaway youth will encounter someone in the commercial sex trade within

42 hours of leaving home. This profoundly changes the diligence of which we need to respond to youth who need our help and care.

“Violence creates more violence but love can break through, changing hearts and lives.” -- Honduran Mennonite youth

April 2016 – Guatemala City, Guatemala; SEMILLA (Latin American Anabaptist Seminary)

In 2002, I left my nursing 13-month-old daughter to participate in a Mennonite Central Committee-Central States Learning Tour to Honduras and Cuba. It was a voluntary mother-child separation, but nonetheless it was hard and I was afraid my child wouldn't remember me after 16 days of my absence. Push the clock forward and now I am living in Guatemala, Central America with that nursing baby who is now 14 years old and is vigorously working at homework, a daily demand of her studies at an all-girls private school.

We love Guatemala with its colorful flowers, cool spring weather and beautiful indigenous cloth. We are encouraged and challenged by the strong faith of our new brothers and sisters in Christ that we have met throughout Central America and Mexico. In the midst of despair and hopelessness they shine a light and accompany each other through these hard times. Most importantly I have learned how to play, sing and celebrate moments of God's grace and love.

But here, I have also encountered memories and stark realities that I began to learn about back on that learning tour so many years ago. The grim reality of the huge numbers of parents and children that are separated through the broken immigration system. Today, more than 1,000 mothers and children are detained in one of the largest immigration detention center in the United States in Dilley, Texas. This facility has the capacity to hold 2,400 people. Many of the women seeking asylum for themselves and their children are from Central America and they are fearful for their lives upon their return to their homeland. Many mothers and children are separated in this process. This is not a voluntary separation and can cause incredible trauma and grief.

I was also shocked on that learning tour to learn about the youth gangs that were threatening the very fabric of the Central American life with violence and destruction. Now, I'm living in Guatemala City, and I am greeted with the local newspaper daily talking about the devastation that these youth gangs are creating. I know to avoid certain neighborhoods which are known to be unsafe.

I began at that time to understand this was a new immigration enforcement tool and yet, today in 2017, the US Justice Department's practice of sending juvenile offenders, who are not

citizens, back to their country of origin continues. My country exports youth gangs. Gangs or *maras* as they are called in Central America are born and flourishing here are really disciples of large, formalized gangs from the United States. The deportees bring with them violent crime, initiation rites, and destructive behavior patterns, which are devastating to communities throughout Central America.

I end with a story about my own daughter.

An author, Jane Kurtz came to the Bluffton Community and our elementary students were given the option to purchase an autographed version of one of the author's books. My young daughter chose a story, *The Storyteller's Beads*. In this short novel, Jane writes a moving story of the unexpected friendship that develops between two girls from different religions who courageously move through difficulties including death and destruction when faced with famine and war in Ethiopia.

On the inside cover, Jane not only signed her name, but she also wrote, "May your stories keep strong." My daughter eagerly began reading the book and quickly got pulled into the human story based on true global happenings in Northeast Africa. This provided her with a glimpse of a story of pain, hardship and later resilience through the unfolding events experienced by the two young heroines.

This story with pain, crisis, and courage has parallels to what we are talking about today here in this place, within the faith family. Abuse in all its forms impacts the lives of children, youth, women and men every day and can be devastating for individuals, families and communities. But yet, as a larger society and within the faith community we often are reluctant to talk about it. But we have to have courage and have tools in place like the Keeping CMC safe policy.

When my daughter finished reading the book she looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "Mom, I get it. I understand what Jane meant when she wrote in my book, "May your stories keep strong. We are not supposed to just feel sad about the pain in the world but we also need to have courage and strength to stop the violence."

Let's stop the violence by creating space for conversations about injustice. Let's also be willing to respond when harm does occur, ending the silence and accompanying our families on this journey of creating a place of wholeness and healing in the church and beyond.

With God's help may it be so...

Laurel Neufeld Weaver MSW LISW-S

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