

“Protecting the Weak: Our Children” Ps. 84:1-4; Matt. 18:6-7 9/16/12

Last November we were all shocked by the revelation that a long-time Penn State assistant football coach had been sexually abusing young boys for many years. Apparently others had known about it or suspected it and done nothing of substance to call him to account or to stop it from happening. This allowed the abuse to continue for years. The squeaky-clean image of the football program was called into question as well as the leadership of the entire university. It was simply unbelievable for many of us. But maybe it shouldn't have been.

Just last month Philadelphia Roman Catholic Monsignor William Lynn was convicted and sentenced to 3-6 years in prison for covering up sexual abuse committed by priests under his supervision. Once again the cover-up allowed the sexual predators to evade punishment for their action and further endangered children under the care of the church.

In July, Rick Curl, a nationally-known swimming coach in the Washington, D.C. area, who had coached Olympic swimmers, stepped down after he was revealed to have had a sexual relationship with a young teenage girl he was coaching a number of years ago. And last year the Vienna Presbyterian Church in Northern Virginia was rocked by the revelation that a former youth director had engaged in sexual misconduct with several teenage girls there a number of years ago.

This problem is much more widespread than we like to think it is, affecting an estimated 80,000 children each year just in our own country.

The effects on these children are devastating. Victims are more likely to suffer from drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, guilt, and eating disorders. They may experience trust issues and serious adult relationship problems. Their academic and work achievement tends to be lower and they are more likely to attempt suicide. Many of these problems may continue well into adulthood. And some of the victims may even repeat the abusive behavior with young children themselves later on. It's hard to overestimate the effect on children of being victimized in this way.

One of the major themes of the Bible from beginning to end is our responsibility to protect those who are vulnerable. Some of the vulnerable people singled out for special care in the Scriptures are the poor, widows, orphans, children, and even immigrants. In Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, there a number of protections for the weak commanded in the law. Later, almost all of the Old Testament prophets railed against Israel for ignoring these laws and exploiting the vulnerable. It was a sign that the people were being unfaithful to God and their covenant with him. Here's an example from the Psalms.

²*"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?"*

³*Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*

⁴*Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*” (Ps. 84:2-4)

The beginning phrase is addressed to judges, some of whom were being influenced by the wealthy and were ignoring the rights of the weak and the poor. (Good thing that doesn't happen any more!) Judges are commanded to do right by them by giving them justice and protecting their rights. The last verse is addressed more widely to the whole community, demanding that they rescue those who are weak and in need, and deliver them from those who are preying on them.

Isaiah says much the same thing.

“Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isa. 1:17) We have a moral responsibility to care for, to defend, to rescue those who are vulnerable and being exploited.

Here's another one: *“Know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor.”* (Ps. 140:12) Notice that God himself cares about those who are vulnerable and watches out for them. When we look out for those who are being exploited, we are doing God's work.

And finally, hear these hard words of Jesus.

“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.

⁷Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! (Matt. 18:6-7)

This powerful warning concerns any who would put a stumbling block in the way of children. It’s hard to imagine a greater stumbling block than childhood sexual abuse.

So what do we do? Scripture is clear that we have a responsibility to protect those who are vulnerable. But how do we protect our children from this unimaginable horror?

One thing we can do is to raise our awareness level about this issue. This sermon is an attempt to do that. The “Child Sexual Assault Task Force” in our community headed by Barbara Ernico is trying to do the same thing. They are looking for members, and would like to have someone from GPC. Let me know if you’re interested in serving. Obviously, parents also have a major responsibility to be vigilant. Not just vigilant about strange-looking people on the streets, but to be vigilant about teachers, coaches, scout leaders, music & drama teachers, babysitters, church workers, and even family members or friends. Listen carefully to your children if they suggest that something inappropriate may have happened to them. Too

often children have gone to parents with concerns, and parents, not wanting to believe this could possibly have happened, dismiss their concerns. Don't do that. Listen carefully to your children or grandchildren and follow-up on their concerns, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to do so.

In addition to the responsibilities we have as individuals, there are also things that institutions can and should do. As a church, we took action well before the Jerry Sandusky revelation to protect our children as best we can. Our Session adopted a child protection policy, which is available in the narthex and Fellowship Hall this morning. It's a pretty detailed policy, but here are a couple highlights. Anyone- volunteer or paid staff- working consistently with our children or youth must undergo a criminal background check. If you're just volunteering occasionally, we don't require it, but if you're working regularly with kids, we do. We also have a three-person rule, which means that an adult and a young person should not be alone together. That's why we need multiple nursery workers each week, even when there are only one or two children in the nursery. You may have noticed that windows have recently been cut into the classroom doors for our children's classrooms, providing visual access at all times to those spaces. And our Sunday School teachers and workers will soon be wearing name badges, identifying them as trusted adult workers. It's a good policy and you may want to read through it to learn the details.

But even the best policy in the world won't work unless individuals are willing to step up and call people to account. The Vienna Presbyterian Church had a good policy in place when the sexual abuse took place there, but no one was willing to step up and call the Youth Director to account when he violated the policy. They liked him, trusted him, and didn't want to get in the way of his growing ministry. I believe that Christians have a responsibility to hold people to account at church, in our schools, on sports teams, in scouting, etc.

Now it takes a great deal of courage to be the one to stand up and say that a certain practice is not in keeping with our policy, or that it looks suspicious. No one wants to be a wet blanket or the sex police! But someone must have the courage to stand up for our children and protect them. They are simply unable to protect themselves in most of these situations. God may have placed you in your current role for just such a reason.

Now, a word to children or youth who may be here this morning. Sometimes a friend may tell you about something very bad that has happened to them. They might even make you promise not to tell anyone. In this case, you should break that promise. Talk to your parents or a trusted teacher or church leader about it and let them help! This is too much for you to deal with alone. Adults, if you see or hear about something that looks suspicious to you, you can always call Child and Youth Services

and report it, even anonymously. Those folks are trained to investigate such reports and take whatever action is necessary.

I believe part of what makes this topic so difficult for us is that it confronts us with the reality of sin. It also reminds us that sin, horrible sin, is not just out there somewhere, but it is right here in our schools, churches, and even our homes. That can be very unsettling to us. It reminds us that sin is tenacious. That even the very best protocols and policies and laws are not always able to save us from determined sinners. Rules and policies cannot save us. They are important and may well protect many of our children. But they cannot save us. For that, we need a Savior. Fortunately, we have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who died not only to forgive our sins, but to break the power of sin over us as individuals as well as the power of sin over our society and our organizations. In Jesus Christ, God was ushering in the Kingdom of God, a kingdom in which there is no exploitation of the weak and vulnerable. And God often uses us to make the values and priorities of his kingdom a reality today in our world, hard though it often is.

Finally, a word to those who may have been abused as children. God loves you, cares about you, and deeply desires your healing. And we love you, care about you, and deeply desire your healing. Please feel free to come to us to talk and for prayer.

I know that this topic makes many of you uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable, too! I thank you for listening anyway. As Christians we have responsibilities to protect the most vulnerable among us, which surely includes our children. Go now and be vigilant.