

“From Commitment to Captivity”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I first became aware of the book, *Trauma and Recovery*, in the late 1990's, about ten years before I went into the ministry. Back then I was a social worker with a private psychotherapy practice. At that time a significant number of the people I was working with were struggling with the impacts that traumatic experiences were having on their lives. The traumatic experiences these people were dealing with came from a wide range of settings. At that time, I was working with trauma victims who were veterans of the Vietnam War, adults who had been abused repeatedly as children, and women who were in relationships with partners who were controlling and abusive. Before I read Hermann's book, I wasn't able to fully recognize or appreciate how these various types of trauma survivors shared many similarities. I was just beginning to see that there were patterns—patterns both in the experiences and the reactions these trauma survivors had. When I read the book for the first time, my eyes were opened as I came to understand that someone who is in a committed relationship with an abuser is a prisoner, a captive. And they are living both in a war zone and a prison that few, if any other people know about.

At the time this book was first published in 1992 it was groundbreaking. That was a time when post-traumatic stress disorder was getting serious and much needed attention. It was getting attention because of the many Vietnam veterans who had come home from that war with wounds to their psyches as well as to their bodies. What Hermann did with her book was to delineate the common threads that bind all trauma survivors together. She identified and exposed prisons and war zones that exist not just in far off countries, but also right in our own communities. And she identified what is needed to assist and support those who have been in, or remain in, such prisons or war zones, either physically or psychologically.

When I would think about the word commitment prior to having read the book, the word had a very positive connotation. When I would hear the word commitment, I would think of the bond between two people who love each other, such as a married couple or a parent and a child. The type of commitment I would think of is incredibly beneficial to those involved in a relationship. After reading the book I saw the flip side of the coin. I saw very clearly how commitment can be detrimental, to one person in the relationship, even to the point of being deadly, while feeding destructive aspects of the other person.

As I reviewed this book in preparation for today's sermon, I found passage after passage that I wanted to share. I can't possibly include all the passages I would want to, but I will share several. And I want to note that in some of the passages I will share, Hermann uses the pronouns “her” and “she” when referring to a victim. While victims of abuse are not limited to one gender or a particular gender identity, domestic abuse victims are predominately female.

But before I share any passages from the book, I want to tell you the reason I felt it was important for me to speak on this topic today. As I mentioned previously, in my counseling practice I worked with people involved in abusive relationships. But that wasn't and isn't my only experience with people who have been traumatized by domestic abuse. One of my family members was in an abusive marriage for more than 50 years. How this family member survived decades of abuse and trauma, I can't comprehend. I know the toll it took on my family member, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. And it took a toll on my family of origin as well. It took a toll because we all cared about, and were committed to this family member, while at the same time being powerless to stop the abuse. I know that my family is not alone in this regard. Given the number of people who are in relationships where domestic abuse exists, it is likely that many, if not all of us, know someone who is in, or has been in, such a committed and abusive relationship. So I am talking about this issue today because it is imperative that we don't avoid this topic. Those who are in an abusive relationship need us to be talking about it. They need us to be talking about it because they often feel they are unable to speak a word about it. They don't feel they can speak a word either because of their fear of being abused for speaking out, or because of the pain of the trauma they live with every day.

I want to share with you now another passage from the chapter, "Captivity," that speaks about what is common in many types of abuse.

The methods that enable one human being to enslave another are remarkably consistent....

Although violence is a universal method of terror, the perpetrator may use violence infrequently, as a last resort. It is not necessary to use violence often to keep the victim in a constant state of fear. The threat of death or serious harm is much more frequent than the actual resort to violence. Threats against others are often as effective as direct threats against the victim. Battered women, for example, frequently report that their abuser has threatened to kill their children, their parents, or any friends who harbor them, should they attempt to escape.

Fear is also increased by inconsistent and unpredictable outbursts of violence and by capricious enforcement of petty rules. The ultimate effect of these techniques is to convince the victim that the perpetrator is omnipotent, that resistance is futile, and that her life depends upon winning his indulgence through absolute compliance. The goal of the perpetrator is to instill in his victim not only fear of death but also gratitude for being allowed to live. Survivors of domestic or political captivity often describe occasions in which they were convinced that they would be killed, only to be spared at the last moment. After several cycles of reprieve from certain death, the victim may come to view the perpetrator, paradoxically, as her savior.

The last sentence in this passage is very important, "the victim may come to view the perpetrator, paradoxically, as her savior." The bond that can be formed between perpetrator and victim then is very complex and can be very powerful. And the dynamics of such a relationship can be confusing and unsettling to a person who may engage in efforts to assist the victim. The victim and the person seeking to assist the victim both want the abuse to stop. The person offering assistance might recognize that getting the victim out of the relationship could be the best or possibly the only way to accomplish the goal. But for the victim, leaving, or having the perpetrator leave, may be perceived as a threat to the person they love as well as to their own survival.

Here is a subsequent passage from the book that speaks to this issue.

Attachment between hostage and captor is the rule rather than the exception. Prolonged confinement while in fear of death and in isolation from the outside world reliably produces a bond of identification between captor and victim. Hostages, after their release, have been known to defend their captors' cause, to visit them in prison, and to raise money for their defense.

The emotional bond that develops between a battered woman and her abuser, though comparable to that of a hostage and captor, has some unique aspects based on the special attachment between victim and perpetrator in domestic abuse. A hostage is taken prisoner by surprise... In domestic battering, by contrast, the victim is taken prisoner gradually, by courtship...

The woman who becomes emotionally involved with a batterer initially interprets his possessive attention as a sign of passionate love. She may at first feel flattered and comforted by his intense interest in every aspect of her life. As he becomes more domineering, she may minimize or excuse his behavior, not only because she fears him but also because she cares for him.

As I said earlier, in such a relationship the bonds that connect the perpetrator and the victim are very complex and can be very powerful. A bit later Hermann expands on this subject of the bonds that exist.

Since most women derive pride and self-esteem from their capacity to sustain relationships, the batterer is often able to entrap his victim by appealing to her most cherished values. It is not surprising, therefore, that battered women are often persuaded to return after trying to flee from their abusers.

The bonds in such a relationship become very, very strong. As strong as metal chains. Hermann's choice of the word "enslave" in the first reading is not an exaggeration when it comes to domestic violence situations.

So what does it take for the victim in such a relationship to free themselves? Hermann shares insights on this in two different passages. Here is the first of the two.

In order to resist developing the emotional dependence of a hostage, she will have to come to a new and independent view of her situation, in active contradiction to the belief system of her abuser. Not only will she have to avoid developing empathy for her abuser, but she will also have to suppress the affection she already feels. She will have to do this in spite of the batterer's persuasive arguments that just one more sacrifice, one more proof of her love, will end the violence and save the relationship.

But the domestic abuse victim can't do this without support and assistance. Doing it alone would be far too much to ask of any person. They need others who they can look to, who they can turn to, when they are in need and ready to reach out. Here is what Hermann writes at the beginning of her final chapter of the book titled, "Commonality."

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group recreates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity.

Repeatedly in the testimony of survivors there comes a moment when a sense of connection is restored by another person's unaffected display of generosity. Something in herself that the victim believes to be irretrievably destroyed—faith, decency, courage—is reawakened by an example of common altruism. Mirrored in the altruism of others, the survivor recognizes and reclaims a lost part of herself. At that moment, the survivor begins to rejoin the human commonality....

The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone.

This passage speaks to what I was saying earlier about us needing to talk about this issue. When we, as individuals and as a community, are willing to talk about this issue, we let those who have been abused and those who are currently being abused know that they are not alone. We are here to offer connection, and provide community.

I know from personal experience that we will not always succeed in our well-intentioned efforts. As I indicated previously, my family members and I were unsuccessful in our efforts to end the abuse of one of our own. Even our very best efforts will sometimes be insufficient to free someone who is captive to an abusive relationship. The point is not to succeed every time. Succeeding once in a hundred times, or even a thousand times, is far better than ignoring or denying the reality of another's captivity. And doing whatever we are able to do, may be what is needed to assist some person in getting free.

It is my hope that what I have shared has provided new insights and perspectives on the issue of domestic abuse victims. And I hope the information I have shared will provide all of us with a bit more awareness about commitment, and how commitment can play a role in leading to a person becoming a captive in a relationship where domestic abuse exists. May we carry this awareness not just in our minds, but also in our hearts, as we go out into the world. It is very possible that we may meet a person or already know a person who needs our support and assistance in order to end the captivity they are living in. Let us use our awareness wisely and compassionately as we strive to empower those who are in need of safety, loving kindness and freedom.

May it be so.