

Bible studies on stories of abuse

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Guidelines for Bible Study

Purpose: To think about abuse stories in the Bible, and to reflect on how these stories can inform our present #MeToo context.

Method: When you plan the Bible study, think about how many people might attend. Between 5 and 12 people is a good size for a Bible study such as this. If your group is larger, plan to divide into small groups for discussion around a question, as many people are uncomfortable speaking in larger group settings. Each Bible study should take between 60 to 90 minutes.

Format: Begin with prayer for God's guidance in reading Scripture. Compose your own prayer or use the one provided here.

God, may our reading of the Bible today
help us walk with people of faith from long ago.
Help us to walk out of Egypt to the Red Sea,
through the desert to Mt. Sinai.
Be with us as we sit on the shores of the Sea of Galilee,
and kneel in the garden of Gethsemane.
May the companion of those who walked the Emmaus road
open the Scriptures to us
and bring us peace and understanding. Amen.

1. Make sure everyone has a copy of the story. Have the story read aloud, taking turns with different people reading a few verses at a time. Ask for volunteers to read, as some may find these stories difficult, especially if they have some close associations with survivors of abuse.
2. When you have finished reading the story, invite people to interact with the text by writing something down. Choose one from the following:
 - write down a word or a phrase that jumps out at you
 - write down different emotions you are feeling as you re-read the story
 - write down any questions you might have as you read the story

Allow people to sit quietly with the text for five minutes as they do this. This is also helpful for introverts who like to process things internally. The extroverts in your group

will likely be keen to start talking as soon as the reading is done, but allow time for silent meditation.

3. Ask people to share their initial responses to the story. As a facilitator, prepare ahead by choosing a one or two questions from the list below that you think your group will find thought-provoking. Don't be afraid of silence after your questions; people may need some time to think. You might want to share something from "Understanding the story" in the course of the discussion.

The Bible study information here is not meant to be duplicated and distributed. If you do that, people will focus on their paper and be anxious to read every word and absorb all the information. The method for this Bible study is verbal, allowing people to ask questions and interact from their own experience with the story.

4. You could spend most of your time on the first section of the questions, but make sure that you move the group along to the second set of questions in "Connecting with the story." The intent is to encourage the group to apply the story to their own lives and to the Canadian context. Encourage the participants to be practical about how the story could be used in your own congregation.
5. Close the Bible study with prayer, giving thanks for new insights, lamenting any sorrows people have shared, and asking for strength to work for justice and peace.

Study One: The Story of Hagar

Read the story: Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21

Understanding the story

What are your emotions as you read this story?

Is the story familiar? Have you read it before?

Have you heard it used in church?

What do you imagine Hagar's life was like up to the point where the story begins?

Given the words of Sarai in Genesis 16:2, how do you think Sarai felt towards God?

How free was Sarai in that society?

Because Hagar despises Sarai, did Hagar have a role to play in the breakdown of their relationship?

What other women in the Hebrew Bible are visited by an angel?

How do you feel about the words spoken to Abraham in Genesis 21:12-13?

Name the power imbalances you see in the story.

How do you feel about Abraham's role?

Taking a slave as your wife was an acceptable legal practice in the Near Eastern World. Hagar's son was Abraham's legitimate heir by law. Ishmael was a real threat to Isaac.

Some people critique this story, saying that it is too focused on the male characters, Abraham and Ishmael. In Gen. 21:13, God says Ishmael will prosper because he is Abraham's son.

However, in Gen. 16:10 the angel of the Lord talks about *Hagar's* descendants being too numerous to count.

Sarai seems to hold a lot of power over Abraham. Abraham always seems to do what Sarai wants. He does not abandon her, even though legally he could have, because she did not give him children. Even God seems to be on Sarai's side sometimes. The narrator of the story does not judge Sarai for her actions.

Hagar has the remarkable experience of seeing and talking to God — the only woman in Hebrew Scripture to do so. She is not a wealthy or powerful woman. She is a young slave girl from a foreign country. When we talk about famous women in the Bible, people often mention Sarah, but less frequently remember Hagar.

Hagar names God. *El-Roi* can be translated “The God Who Sees Me.” Hagar thought she was totally alone, but God was with her even when she felt most abandoned. In some ways this is a reverse story of the Exodus. God tells her to return to the bondage she was fleeing. Pregnant and alone in the desert, Hagar seems to have been trying to get home to Egypt, as the wilderness of Shur is on the border of Egypt. The fact that she left in the first place shows that Hagar had great courage. She was nearing her home country, it may be that she would have survived in Egypt, her home. She makes the choice to go back.

Both Sarai and Hagar are women who have very few options. The childless Sarah is failing at the one thing that her society expected of her: being a mother. In patriarchal culture she would have been seen as cursed because she hadn't conceived: the story shows us that she believed God was preventing her from having children. Hagar is a woman who is also disadvantaged in the culture because she is a foreigner from Egypt, and a slave.

We pick up the story of Hagar's life in mid-stream; we don't know how she became a slave. Certainly being chosen to bear a child for a wealthy man might have led her to believe that her life would be easier. Even if Abraham didn't care for her, she would be protected by her son who would be Abraham's heir.

Connecting with the story

Who are the Hagers of today, and how are they treated?

What makes us most uncomfortable in this story? Why?

How was power used in abusive ways in this story?

How did class, nationality and gender intersect?

The story of Hagar could be read as saying, “Go back to the person who abused you.” What do we do with the part of the story that talks about submission?

How can this story be life-giving for us in the Canadian context today?

What are the similarities and differences between our societies?

How could this story be used in a worship service?

“As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the

resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, ...the pregnant woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady ...the welfare mother and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.” (Phyllis Tribe, *Texts of Terror*, p. 28)

In that culture and that time, there would have been very few options for Hagar. She was alone in the wilderness; the story does not even mention whether she took food with her. She found a spring to get water, but wild animals would certainly have been coming to the spring as well. She was alone and vulnerable. Were Hagar’s parents still alive? Was she hoping to go back to Egypt? Had she been sold or captured into slavery? The only thing Hagar had was her body and her unborn child. The angel tells her to return to Sarah. When Hagar decides to leave the second time, Ishmael is a teenager, and would have been able to help Hagar find food and shelter.

Womanist Bible scholars and authors like Renita Weems, Delores Williams, Joan Martin, Clarice Martin, Katie Canon, Cheryl Gilkes, Kelly Brown, and many others have stepped into the biblical dialogue by using the experience of African-American women as the starting place for a dialogue with the sacred stories of the Bible. They emphasize the African-American interpretation of the story of Hagar, the Egyptian woman in Genesis. It’s a story of relationships between women of different races in a world dominated by male power structures. How do privileged women today relate to the women who serve them, whether as domestics in their homes, in public establishments such as restaurants, dry cleaners, and nail salons, or, at an even greater distance, in the Global South, where many of North American clothes and shoes are made?

Another complication with this story is that it was used in the 1800s by people who supported slavery. They pointed to the angel telling Hagar to go back to her master as proof that God supports slavery. Mistreatment was not a good enough reason to run away from a slave master. How can this story be good news, when it has been used as bad news for so long?

In worship we refer to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Sometimes people who are being inclusive talk about the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Consider speaking about our God as the God of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah.

Study Two: The Story of Jephthah’s daughter

Read: Judges 11:1-11, 29-40

Understanding the Story

What are your emotions as you read this story?

Is the story familiar, have you read it before?

Have you heard it used in church?

What do you imagine the daughter’s life was like before this story?

How free was she?

Why don’t we know her name?

What role did the girl’s acceptance of the sacrifice play in her death?

Why do you think the story emphasizes her virginity?

Where is God in the story?
Why doesn't the story tell us that it was wrong for the girl to be sacrificed?
Name the power imbalances you see in the story.
How do you feel about Jephthah's life?
Why do you suppose that there is no mention of Jephthah's wife?
The daughter bargains for two months to mourn; what does this bargaining reveal about the young woman?
What is the role of the daughter's friends in the story?

The story takes place when the Israelites were trying to maintain their territory, probably between 1200-1250 BCE. The Israelites did not yet have a king, but were ruled by various charismatic leaders.

Jephthah is identified as a son of a prostitute. Other legitimate sons in his family of origin had driven him away so he did not receive an inheritance. We don't know why the father of Jephthah does not prevent him from being abused. There are parallels between Jephthah and Ishmael because of how they were treated by their families, and because they were both driven away from their own country. Jephthah is invited to return to his own country, but he appears to have doubts that he will really be accepted (11:9).

Child sacrifice was acceptable at that time period. The Ammonites, the people Jephthah and the people of Israel were fighting, regularly sacrificed children to appease Molech, their god. The God of Israel had prohibited the practice of sacrificing children (see Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5). The Israelites were often tempted to worship Molech; King Solomon even built a temple for Molech (I Kings 11:7). The prophet Jeremiah speaks out against worshipping Molech and the practice of child sacrifice (Jeremiah 32:35).

Somehow Jephthah believes that God has asked him to take this vow. Did Jephthah think that an animal would come to meet him, or a servant? It was a dangerous vow for him to make as it was customary for women in the household to come out dancing to meet returning warriors. Abraham also believed that God called him to sacrifice his son Isaac; at the last minute, God provided a substitute, and Isaac was saved. In this story, no substitute is found and the girl apparently perishes.

Jephthah blames his daughter for what happens. He says it is her fault. In normal circumstances, he would have been angry if she didn't come out and meet him dancing, but now he blames her for this. He is more concerned with the misery he is suffering than with her feelings.

Both Jephthah and his daughter suffer because of their parents. Jephthah suffered because of who his mother was, and because of the inaction of his father. Jephthah's daughter suffers because of her father.

Connecting with the Story

Which women in our society are unnamed, like Jephthah's daughter?
What makes us most uncomfortable in this story? Why?
How was power used in abusive ways in this story?

The story of Jephthah's daughter could be read as saying, "Submit to death because of your father's actions." What do we do with the part of the story that talks about submission?

Do you think the daughter was courageous?

How are women today courageous in hopeless situations?

How can this story be life-giving for us in the Canadian context today?

What is the significance of groups of women gathering to remember women who have died today?

How could this story be used in a worship service in your congregation?

The story emphasizes a number of times that the daughter was a virgin, and had no children who would remember her name. However, the women who mourned with her did remember her. The story tells us that it became a tradition in Israel to mourn the death of Jephthah's daughter. Each year, Hebrew women would gather together for four days in a special place to remember the young woman who was killed. Jephthah's daughter's name is forgotten, but she is not forgotten.

Read Hebrews 11:32-34. Here Jephthah is named among the faithful of God. Ironically, it is his name that is remembered in the New Testament, and not the story of the unnamed daughter whom he killed.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the American crusader for women's rights, wrote in 1895 about her frustration with Jephthah's daughter's meekness:

This Jewish maiden is known in history only as Jephthah's daughter —she belongs to the no-name series. The father owns her absolutely, having her life even at his disposal. We often hear people laud the beautiful submission and the self-sacrifice of this nameless maiden. To me it is pitiful and painful. I would that this page of history were gilded with a dignified whole-souled rebellion. I would have had the daughter receive the father's confession with a stern rebuke saying: "I will not consent to such a sacrifice.... You may sacrifice your own life as you please, but you have no right over mine.... My first duty is to develop all the powers given to me and to make the most of myself and my own life. Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice. I demand the immediate abolition of the Jewish law on vows. Not with my consent can you fulfill yours." This would have been a position worthy of a brave woman. (*The Women's Bible*, Part II, pp. 25-26).

Every year people in Canada gather on December 6 to remember the women who were slain in the [Montreal massacre](#). Similarly, people around the country gather at candlelight vigils to mourn women who have been killed by violence. Mourning together raises consciousness about the wastefulness and evil of violence; it can energize people to work to prevent violence and abuse.

The Bible never says whether Jephthah lived to regret sacrificing his daughter. We never know whether he lived long enough to admit that he was wrong in equating his will with God's will. We can only hope. But it is possible to change. Change your mind. Change your thinking. It is possible to be changed. The desire

for the approval of others drove Jephthah to make a rash vow to God. In his zeal to prove that he was a man of honor he convinced himself that sacrificing his daughter's life was the right thing to do. Presumably Jephthah kept his vow, and in so doing, broke his daughter's heart, broke our hearts as readers, and I dare say, broke God's heart.

Ah! It's possible sometimes for you to be both right and wrong at the same time. We're like the Gileadite Jephthah: we do the right thing by doing the wrong thing. Sincere, but wrong. We know only so well in our times how easy it is to equate wrong with right, hate with holiness, and murder with faithfulness. We don't have to look very far. The horrific bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the thousands of lives that were lost in the terrorist takeover of commercial air flights, the bombings, raids, and retaliations throughout the Middle East (Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, Turkey, Pakistan) and elsewhere in the world in the name of right, righteousness, justice, holiness... even God.-- Renita Weems, Radio program "Sincerely wrong" #4522, March 17, 2002

Close the Bible Study with these words of lament by Phyllis Tribble (Excerpted from "Lament" by Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, pp.108-109).

Daughter of Jephthah, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death a virgin child,
Greeting her father with music and dances,
facing his blame with clarity and strength.

Ye daughters of Israel, weep for your sister,
who suffered the betrayal of her foolish father,
who turned to you for solace and love.

How are the powerless fallen
in the midst of victory!

The daughter of Jephthah lies slain upon thy high places.
I weep for you, my little sister.
Very poignant is your story to me:
your courage to me is wonderful,
surpassing the courage of men.

How are the powerless fallen,
a terrible sacrifice to a faithless vow!

Study Three: The Story of Tamar

Read: 2 Samuel 13:1-22

Understanding the story:

What are your emotions as you read this story?
Is the story familiar, have you read it before?
Have you heard it used in church?
What do you imagine Tamar's life was like up to the point where the story begins?
How free was Tamar in that society?
Why did Tamar ask Amnon not to send her away?
Name the power imbalances you see in the story.
How do you feel about David's actions/inaction?
Where is God in the story?

This story of incest is in the family of one of the most famous people in the Bible. David's son Amnon rapes Tamar, David's daughter by a different mother. Absalom, Tamar's full brother, is outraged and kills Amnon in revenge.

The story clearly portrays Amnon as the villain who plots against an innocent woman. The story shows him scheming, lying and hating his half-sister. He ignores the cultural customs that would have kept him from raping his sister. The story says that he "loves" her. The love is obviously lust, as it disappears as soon as he has raped her.

Tamar appeals to Amnon, saying that if he asks David for her hand in marriage, David would give her to him. This was customarily not done in that culture, but Tamar suggests that Amnon is such a favourite with David, that he would bend these rules to please his son. Tamar is trying to save her life; she knows that her hope for marriage and children are ruined by the rape. If she marries her brother, she at least will have the dignity of living in her own home and having children of her own.

The story is about an imbalance of power. Amnon has the power to rape his sister; he is bigger and stronger than she is. David has the power to make justice, but does nothing to punish Amnon for what he has done.

The story tells us that David is "furious". However Amnon is his first-born son, the one who will be king after him. It is too costly for him to give up Amnon and send him away in disgrace, so while David is angry, he tolerates the behaviour. Tamar's dignity is worth less to him than Amnon's presence. It may be that David's toleration of this abomination is what sets Absalom against his father so deeply.

The family dynamic is complex. It appears that Amnon is well-loved by David. This makes sense since Amnon is David's first-born. We find out later, after Absalom has tried to become king in David's place and is killed, that David truly loved Absalom, even in spite of his rebellion.

The story does not tell us how David felt towards Tamar, other than that he is furious when she is violated. A beautiful young daughter was valuable to the King; he could have married her to someone to form an important political alliance. It may be that he did love her, but not enough to punish his first-born son.

It may be that there was rivalry between Amnon and Absalom. David certainly loved Absalom deeply. 2 Sam 14:25 says: “Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom.” Absalom certainly had the charisma to lead people, as he instigates a revolt against the popular King David, and “stole the hearts of the people of Israel.” (15:6) Amnon might have felt threatened by Absalom, and wanted to hurt him by violating his sister. He refers to Tamar as “Absalom’s sister”. It may be that she is treated as a pawn in a power game between two brothers.

If you have time, read the rest of chapter 13 to see how Absalom gets his revenge on Amnon. Violence begets violence in this story.

Connecting with the story

What makes us most uncomfortable in this story? Why?

How was power used in abusive ways in this story?

How does this story relate to the current #MeToo movement to name violation?

How are modern families who are divided by incest the same or different than Tamar’s family?

Did Tamar have a choice about how to respond to the rape?

How do the actions of Jonadab and Amnon’s servants affect Tamar’s life? Do they have a role in this story? Can this be compared to the employees of Harvey Weinstein, and their facilitation of his abuse of women?

How could this story be used in a worship service?

There is a male conspiracy for this rape: Jonadab, Tamar’s cousin, plots her violation. The male servants leave so she can be raped, and after the rape, a servant throws her out and bolts the door. Did the servants have any choice in their actions? What would have happened if they refused to co-operate?

Tamar chooses to publicly mourn the way she has been violated. She rips her clothes, throws ashes on her head, and leaves wailing. There is no doubt to everyone she meets that this is a woman in crisis. If she had tried to cover up what happened, it may be that the servants would have spread the story, and she would have been disgraced. They may have said she went with her brother willingly. It may be that she would have become pregnant and been disgraced. Publicly declaring that she has been violated is her way of showing that it was not her fault. It is her way of calling for justice from her powerful father.

Absalom tries to comfort Tamar by saying that she “should not take it to heart”. These are hollow words indeed, for she has been sexually violated by her brother, and the cultural context of that time dictated that her future was ruined. Her hopes for children and her own home were shattered.

The story tells us that Tamar lived as a desolate woman in her brother Absalom’s house. A few chapters later we hear that Absalom had three sons and a daughter. (2 Sam 14:27) The daughter is called Tamar, and is described as a beautiful woman, just as her aunt had been called beautiful. Tamar, Absalom’s sister, may have helped to raise the girl, since they lived in the same household together.

We are not told the story of Absalom's family. Later in the story, Absalom is killed as a traitor because he has rebelled against his father the king. He had been heir to the throne and then king himself before he became a fugitive. What happened to his wife, Tamar his sister, and his children when he died? We are not told whether King David shelters them. We don't know the ending to their story. What do you imagine the ending was?

Study Four: The Story of the Unnamed Woman

Read Judges 19

Understanding the story

What are your emotions as you read this story?

Is the story familiar; have you read it before?

Have you heard it used in church?

What do you imagine the woman's life was like up to the point where the story begins?

How free was the woman in that society?

How do the words of the owner of the house affect you?

Name the power imbalances you see in the story.

How do you feel about the Levite?

Where is God in the story?

Why does the story not condemn the actions of the Levite or the owner of the house?

“A Levite has an honored place in society that sets him above many other males; a concubine has an inferior status that places her beneath other females. Legally and socially, she is not the equivalent of a wife but is virtually a slave, secured by a man for his own purposes.” (Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 66.)

In Judges 19:2, the concubine acts. “Two manuscript traditions have survived. The Hebrew and Syriac claim that ‘his concubine played the harlot’ against the Levite, while the Greek and Old Latin maintain that ‘his concubine became angry with him.’ . . . Was she unfaithful to him or did he cause her anger? Ancient manuscripts give contradictory answers; the story itself allows either reading.” (Trible, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 66-67.)

The story does not portray the Levite as a total ogre. When he goes to get his concubine back from her father's house, he is described as trying to persuade her heart, to get her to come home. He would have been in his rights to take her by force. Ironically, the story does not relate what he says to her, but only talks about the interaction between the two men.

When the Levite is in a tight spot with nowhere to spend the night, he meets someone from his hometown. He casually refers to his own concubine as “your maidservant,” (verse 19) perhaps hinting that hospitality would have a reward of using the concubine.

The owner of the house is appalled that the townsmen would do “a vile thing” to the guest in his home. He seems totally willing to offer his own daughter and the concubine for the men’s pleasure. He does not ask the women or seem to care what they think. He merely wants to protect his male guest. The story does not condemn his willingness to give the women over to be raped. It is clear in the story that men’s bodies are more important than women’s bodies.

The woman survives the terrible ordeal of being gang-raped. She has collapsed, with the heart-rending detail that she falls with her hands on the threshold of the doorway. The Greek text of the Hebrew Bible informs us that the woman is dead, while the Hebrew text allows the possibility that the woman is still alive. (Later in 20:5 the Levite states that she died, he never claims that the Benjaminites killed her.)

What we do know is that by the end of the day, the Levite has cut her up into 12 pieces, to send to the 12 tribes of Israel, protesting the lack of hospitality he experienced from the Benjaminites. Is he a murderer? The story does not condemn him as a murderer.

The woman’s body is used to start a war against the Benjaminites. The last verse in the book of Judges says, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” The stories in Judges continually show that chaos and anarchy reigned because there was no order. It was a time filled with violence. Unfortunately, it appears that even when Israel did have a king, there was still plenty of violence.

Connecting with the story

In this story, in contrast to the story of Tamar, the woman has no speaking role. How would this story be different if told from the woman’s perspective?

How are women’s voices silenced today?

Who are the unnamed women of today?

What makes us most uncomfortable in this story? Why?

Why should we read a story this disturbing?

How was power used in abusive ways in this story? How did class and gender intersect?

How can this story be life-giving for us in the Canadian context today?

What are the similarities and differences between our societies?

How could this story be used in a worship service?

Phyllis Trible describes this woman: “Captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered — this woman is the most sinned against.” (*Texts of Terror*, p. 81)

Violence begets more violence. Read Judges 21. The Israelites attack and kill most of the Benjaminites, including all their women. At the end of chapter 21, more violence is done to more women; the story tells us that the men came and seized the young women while they were dancing. The rape of one woman turns into the rape of hundreds. Ironically a war begun to protest the rape of one woman ends up with the war-makers committing similar crimes themselves.

“Misogyny belongs to every age, including our own. Violence and vengeance are not just characteristics of a distant, pre-Christian past; they infect the community of the elect to this day. Woman as object is still captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered. To take to heart this ancient story, then, is to confess its present reality. The story is alive, and all is not well. Beyond confession we must take counsel to say, ‘Never again.’ Yet this counsel is itself ineffectual unless we direct our hearts to that most uncompromising of all biblical commands, speaking the word not to others, but to ourselves: Repent. Repent.” (*Texts of Terror*, p. 87)

Phyllis Tribble points out that in the Hebrew Bible this story is immediately followed by the story of Hannah. In the Greek Bible, the story of Ruth follows this story. Both the story of Ruth and the story of Hannah are in marked contrast to the unnamed concubine. Ruth and Hannah have speaking roles in their story, and have a place in their society, however limited.

Biblical Discussion Starters about Abuse

The bent-over woman

The woman who anointed Jesus

A stumbling block

The Bent-over Woman

“Now he [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’” Luke 13:10-12

What does it mean to be bent over, to live your life looking down, rather than forward? Your vision is focused on your own feet, just taking the next step, and the next, and the next. Jesus singles out the woman who is bent over.

The crowd is large, she's jostled, she can't manage eye contact with Jesus. Something has brought her here, a tiny spark of hope. Here is a man who cares for people like her, people on the outside, people who don't fit...who have leprosy, are blind or are lame. Jesus sees her affliction, he feels compassion for her and her long years of bondage. He sets her free.

Not everyone was happy with Jesus' action. A religious leader accuses Jesus of breaking the sabbath law. Jesus is stunned by their hardness of heart.

Tell this story:

Living with violence can leave you feeling bent over. Theresa was a woman who lived with violence. I met her when she was in her third year at university. She was a small shy woman with blonde hair. Her quick intelligence made her stand out in the classes she attended.

We gradually became friends, and towards the end of the year she invited me to her home. Her husband Mark was handsome and pleasant, with dark hair, blue eyes, and a ready smile. They lived together in a beautiful apartment in the country with their one-year old daughter. We had a good time, but something didn't seem quite right. I couldn't put my finger on it.

A few weeks later I met Theresa in the library. She was sitting staring out the window. I made some comment about how nice it had been to meet her husband. She was quiet and serious. "It's not all as it seems. He seems so nice to you." Slowly, in a few brief sentences she told me that he was very mean to her, and flew into rages, and physically hurt her. She tried to go on, go to classes, invite people over; be normal. But it wasn't working. She felt trapped, and didn't know where to turn.

I asked her about her family, whether they knew. She said the raging started soon after they were married. It wasn't until she was pregnant that he became violent, kicking and punching her. She fled to her mother's house. There her mother and her sister asked, "What did you do to make him so mad?" They told her to go home and make it work. "He's the father of your baby, you're married to him, as a Christian you can't leave your husband."

Having a baby had not made things better, Mark's violence continued. Theresa said she was exhausted balancing the needs of a baby with trying to tiptoe around her husband and avoid his rages. She'd tried talking again to her mother about it, but she refused to get involved, saying, "You two have to work it out."

"What do you think?" she asked me. "As a Christian, what am I supposed to do?"

Theresa was bent over. She went to class, did her shopping, took care of the baby, putting one step after another. But she was trapped, she couldn't see which way to turn.

Can you think of people you know who are bent over by abuse?
How are we to be Christ-like when we meet people hurt by abuse?

The woman who anointed Jesus

“And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he [Jesus] was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.” Luke 7:37-38

There are two traditions around this story. This story from the gospel of Luke characterizes the woman as a sinner, while the story from the gospel of John names the woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Mary is never characterized as a sinner, but rather one who sits at the feet of Jesus to learn.

We really know little about either woman. What we do know from this story is that the woman is crying so hard her tears bathe Jesus' feet. There is a pain inside her that comes flooding out, and she uses that pain to minister to someone else.

Tell this story:

I know someone who is like the woman who anointed Jesus. Helen is a 25-year-old woman. She recently fled from an abusive relationship. She had lived with a man for five years. He had verbally and physically abused her. She tried to leave after the first year, but he had hunted for her and finally found her living at her girlfriend's house. He beat Helen and dragged her home. He told her that if she ever left again he would kill not only her, but members of her family as well.

Helen tried to survive in the relationship as best she could. She had a daughter, Annie, and she poured all her love into the little girl. One day Helen came home and found her husband sexually abusing 3-year-old Annie. Helen waited and planned. She got friends to help her secretly leave the province, to live in the home of a distant relative.

When I met Helen her daughter was five years old. Annie was a shy little girl, with bright eyes that peered out as she hid behind her mother's legs. Annie doesn't talk. She makes sounds, but she will not say anything, although she comprehends what is said to her, and uses sign language to communicate.

Wiping away tears, Helen told me that the trauma her daughter suffered because of the abuse had taken away her voice. Now Helen's reason for living is to love her daughter and hope some day that she will find her voice.

Helen is finding an outlet for her tears, she has dedicated herself to raising Annie. Helen still worries that one day Annie's father will find them.

Do you know someone whose life is characterized by weeping because of great harms they have suffered?

What does it mean to be with people who are mourning because of abuse?

A stumbling block

“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.” Matthew 18:6

Sometimes we characterize Jesus as only kind and loving. Reading the gospels reminds us that Jesus was not only loving, but also just.

Jesus denounced people who abused others. This included church leaders who tithed the poor and placed burdens on them that they could not bear. He calls these people whited sepulchers, and snakes and vipers. Jesus saw injustice in the temple, and drove it out in a very physical way.

In this passage from Matthew 18, Jesus uses strong language to condemn those who hurt children.

Tell this story:

I am haunted by the image of a little girl being hurt. It's not an image of a child broken and bleeding, but a type of hurt that's much more difficult to assess. Melissa was six years old, and I was her caregiver. Her mother had recently separated from Melissa's abusive father. I came into the home every weekday morning to take care of Melissa and her 3-year-old brother Parker.

I arrived at work one morning to find the door splintered and swinging open. I heard yelling from upstairs. I ran towards the voices, noticing that there were holes punched in the wall. I found Melissa's mother cornered in the bathroom, her husband threatening her and yelling at her. He smelled of alcohol and looked wildly angry.

She cried out to me that I should call the police, but her husband swore at me and told me not to move.

Melissa and Parker, who had been hiding behind the door of the bathroom, came running to me. I picked up Parker and held Melissa's hand as her father dragged her mother roughly from the bathroom by her shoulder.

Melissa sprang into action, running to her dad. She threw her arms around his legs, "Daddy, daddy, let's go shopping." She jumped up and down, smiling and trying to get his attention. "Daddy, daddy, can you read me a book? Let's go to a movie!" Her father ignored her as he pulled his wife down the stairs and into the car. Melissa wilted against me, watching everything with big eyes.

The father had torn the phone from the wall, so we called the police from the neighbour's house. Soon extended family came to take care of the children. Later that day, Melissa's mother managed to calm her husband down and he brought her home several hours later. She had feared for her life, as he had threatened to kill her.

I will never forget Melissa's little face, as she vainly tried to distract her father from the violence. Such a brave little girl, trying so hard to protect her mother, loving a father who ignored her needs so completely.

Do you know children who have been hurt in this way?

What are the long-term effects of witnessing violence?

What do you think are the effects of this on the person who does the abusing?

How can churches help to foster healing for people who have witnessed violence?