Valiant Women: Survivors of Domestic Violence

Carol J. Schlueter

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss2/7

This Articles is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
Valiant Women: Survivors of Domestic Violence

Carol J. Schlueter
Assistant Professor of New Testament Theology,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

The phrase “valiant women” rightly reminds us of key women in our collective theological and ecclesial histories, women such as Julian of Norwich and Sojourner Truth. On second thought, the phrase can also make us recall women who work for social justice every day at the grassroots of life, women like the mothers and the grandmothers of the missing sons and daughters of Argentina, women who march every Thursday at 3:00 p.m. in the Plaza de Mayo.\(^1\) They too are valiant women. Yet I have been privileged to discover another group of valiant women: survivors of domestic violence.

My training in the New Testament is deeply rooted in knowing the socio-historical context of, for example, the material in the gospels. This knowledge is essential for my New Testament work, but it is also essential for me as a Christian theologian both to try to listen to where God is moving in contemporary human life and to reflect upon discipleship.

In recent years, I have been meeting with groups of survivors of domestic violence in Ontario. Together we explore God’s presence in our lives. I have found the experience to be a Gospel encounter.

Domestic violence is the number one health threat to women and accounts for more deaths than automobile accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.\(^2\) Survivors of domestic violence are valiant women\(^3\) because they have broken free from literally being beaten down, physically and spiritually. They have broken free from the grip of death and are choosing life. Their spirits have not been crushed but have risen up to life, even though that life is still painful. Their stories are little known because these women do not often tell them openly. In opening ourselves to these accounts, we can raise our consciousness
about the nature and prevalence of domestic violence and we can learn how to make a Christian response. I want to celebrate these valiant women, who are contemporary prophets calling the church to respond to domestic violence by walking with survivors in their fight for new life.

This paper has two main themes. First, I want to honor survivors of domestic violence as valiant women by tracing the stories of Jessie and Susan⁴ (not their real names), whom I interviewed recently, stories which are very similar to countless others, some of which are outlined in videos currently available.⁵ In recounting parts of my interview with these women, I have kept their own words as much as possible. With their permission, I have cited direct quotations wherever possible. Some changes have been made to protect their identities.

Interwoven throughout these women’s stories is the second theme, the role of the church. We hear about its several responses as seen through their eyes. I shall recount the story of several churches which turned their backs on an opportunity to meet Christ in these women, and I shall discuss an example of a church which responded helpfully. We listen for the effect of the church’s action in order to learn more about what attitudes and behaviours are needed as a truly Christian response to that issue. As ambassadors for Christ in the world the church can have a healing role to play, as we shall see. Thus, the second theme asks us to reflect upon domestic violence as a Gospel issue and we explore some of the risks facing us in becoming involved.

The stories of these and other survivors are moving and challenging; their courage and resilient spirits are inspiring. I hope that their words will not only stir up a response in you but move you to be part of the solution to domestic violence, a large part of the violence in our culture.

**Two Valiant Women: Susan and Jessie**

Wife assault transcends particular cultural groups or socioeconomic status.⁶ Trying to come to terms with their memories, women of diverse cultures and status tell with painful eloquence the story of how they came to leave an abusive situation in their homes.

Susan and Jessie, both in their early thirties, had recently left the “second stage” program of a local women’s shelter. In
this stage, residents move out of the shelter but continue to be supported by its staff, who provide them with information as to community resources for finding jobs and housing. At this point, they are starting new lives for themselves away from the place which has offered them their initial sanctuary.

Susan and Jessie both experienced physical violence in their marriages. They eventually left their homes and sought refuge in a women’s shelter. They have been out of the shelter for about three years now. I asked both women what role their church played in their dilemma.

Susan, who does not attend church regularly, says, “Although I did not attend church at the time I left my husband, I think that my backing in the church helped me to be able to leave.” From the safety of the shelter, she went to see her pastor. Initially he was supportive. However, after talking to her husband, the pastor said she should go back to him. Susan sums up her reaction to the pastor’s swift reversal of attitude: “I haven’t gone back to church much. I had hoped to have the kids baptized so that they could become part of the church, so that they would have some backing, but after his about-face, I thought, Forget it!”

When I asked her what she wished he would have said, she replied, “I wish he would have been more supportive. I wish that he would have stayed with the response he gave me the first time. It would have been fine, but after we had that other conversation in which he turned right around, it just turned me off.”

Jessie, on the other hand, says that she had no religious upbringing, although she was baptized in the Anglican church. She became a Christian a few years before her marriage, and it is this experience which supported her during her ordeal. “During the turmoil and what was happening to me, I knew, biblically speaking, that my husband was wrong regardless of what any minister or priest said. I get my strength from God.” 7

Jessie was terrorized by her husband and had knives held to her throat. To this day she must hide her whereabouts from her former husband because of death threats he has made against her. She says,

I knew it was not acceptable in God’s eyes to treat me this way. Five months after my marriage, I went into the shelter, but I still believed that the bonds of marriage still hold: Your husband is still
to love you. Why is he doing this? You’re tossed between other people and what you know in your heart and soul. I didn’t want my kids to live this way. I went to the shelter.

The church gave Jessie five different responses when she told it about her situation. The first was to disbelieve her; the second was to urge her to return to a life-threatening situation; the third was to abandon her; the fourth was to threaten her; and the fifth was to believe and support her. We can observe the first three responses in her recounting a visit she made to her pastor while she was still living with her husband.

I went to a pastor and when I talked to him, he was very supportive. Then when he talked to my husband, he said, “Well, you know your husband said that he didn’t beat you. Where are the marks on your neck?” And I said to him, “Well, it’s just a he-said/she-said thing, and what I suggest you do is that you stop everything and that you take it to the Lord in prayer. We’ll talk again. I don’t want to hear that you are on my side or my husband’s side. I want to hear that you spoke to the Lord.” And the pastor did, and he had nothing to say when he called back. He apologized for his judgment, but he didn’t offer support.

Jessie was strong in her conviction that she deserved a better life, even though the pastor she went to for help allowed the abuse to continue by not believing her and by siding with her abuser. Jessie took a painful and gigantic leap from several fundamental building blocks of her identity: her home, her pastor, and as we shall see, her congregation.

The church’s fourth response was to threaten her. As Jessie was trying to make her decision, the Christian people around her were less than helpful. As she puts it, “People were telling me ‘If you break up, it’s adultery.’ ” In the end she trusted herself and God. “I had to make the right decision. God was helping me to make the right decision.”

The pastor’s disbelief of Jessie and both his and the church members’ minimalization of her suffering, as well as their pressuring her to remain in an abusive situation, created an immense load for her—for anyone—to bear. As Dr. Anne Gauley says, “[Abused women] not only have to fight the abuser to keep sanity and safety, they also have to fight the community who want to blame them and put them down.”

The resilience of the human spirit is evident in the desire to trust and to reach out again and again in spite of betrayals.
After Jessie had left her home and had gone to the shelter, she reached out again to a pastor. "I wanted to hear a warm voice... someone who had known me, someone who believed what I was saying. I called a church in another city where I had lived about five years earlier."

The fifth response of the church was different. Says Jessie, "The pastor said, 'Jessie, if you say this is true, then it's true. Tell us what you need. Letters of recommendation? Money? Anything. Just call us.' " Jessie ended up moving closer to that church and is now an active member. The response of this pastor serves as a model for a Christian response.

When I asked Jessie what she wished the church had done in her first attempt to reach out, she replied,

Just trusted me as a woman, as a human being. A victim shouldn't have to prove that they are being strangled. How dare you expect me to prove that my husband has held guns to my head and that we're being held hostage for eight hours at a time while we're being terrorized? I didn't expect anything except, "Believe me".

The pastor and his wife who believed Jessie were very supportive to her. The congregation looked after her emotional and financial needs, including her moving expenses and her car repairs, so that she could go into hiding because her husband had made death threats against her.

Quite often people ask why women remain in abusive situations. Jessie has this to say:

When you're in it, you think "I can stay here. I know what's going to happen today and tomorrow and the next day. If I leave, I don't know anything about what's going to happen." I lost my home. I lost my financial security. I had never been poor in my life. I left with a suitcase in one hand and a baby in the other. I had to take my other daughter, my first-born, to her father (different father) because I couldn't look after her. Do you know how hard that is? This was extremely hard on the ego. I had to leave my ego behind. I was leaving for the unknown. He said he'd kill me if I left him. You know that if you stay that you're going to get beaten. So what's better? Getting killed or getting beaten? It's scarier to leave than to stay. I had to go into hiding and to segregate myself from my friends and family because he had threatened them too. I had no one. I had to protect everyone that I loved.

Quite plainly, despite her earlier disappointing experience with the church, Jessie still thought of it as a possible safe place where she would be accepted and believed, and so she reached out to it again. This is incredible faith.
The congregation did in fact respond positively. Jessie reports that members have been supportive but that there is still an underlying prejudice which she must face.

You still get segregated in the congregation. You’re still branded “One of those”, a marked woman. It is unspoken, but I get the feeling that people are saying, “Sons, don’t touch her with a ten foot pole”, and I have to deal with and come to terms with that attitude. The pastor and his wife are wonderful and they don’t feed into that garbage, but much of the congregation does.

When I asked Jessie what she’d like to say to pastors, she replied,

This [domestic violence] isn’t fun and games. Women don’t leave their husbands to live in the shelters for the money, for fun, or for kicks. It’s all we have. It’s not fun. It’s humiliating, disgusting. The woman is begging to go there for survival. If you doubt that, take it to the Lord.

Susan concurs:

I agree with Jessie. We don’t do it for fun and games. It’s not something we haven’t thought about. It’s usually the last straw, and it takes a lot of strength and courage to make that decision. Listen to women. Try to change the attitude that divorced people are not all right. I still have a great fear of church people, that they’re not going to be accepting. I haven’t gone back to church regularly. I stay on the outside. Churches could get more involved. Some men could volunteer to be big brothers to boys who have no male role models. Families could invite a woman and her kids over. The modeling by loving men would be good for both girls and boys to learn how a loving man can relate to kids.

Before she married her husband, Jessie had no idea that he was an abuser. “I knew that he was the man who loved me. He treated me so special. I was his princess. He respected me. Three weeks after we were married, it started. I knew this wasn’t right.” Women who have to face the truth that they married an abuser, have to confront the loss of deep and meaningful dreams.

The grief of women like Susan and Jessie is like that described in these words from Psalm 55:12-14:

It is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
It is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
then I could hide from him.
But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.
Valiant Women

We used to hold sweet converse together....

The typical cycle of domestic violence comprises a build up of tension, an outbreak of violence, followed by remorse by the batterer for his actions, and then a "honeymoon stage" during which he gives loving attention and often gifts to the woman. It is during this last stage that a wife may hope that things are changing, and therefore she stays.

Susan was married for eight years. She says that before she married him, she had an inkling that her husband could be violent but denied it. She always thought, well, if we change this piece and this piece, it will get better. But that didn't happen. The beatings started after she began to work outside the home. Her husband said that she'd changed and he began to harass her about how much money she had in her bank account. He banged her head against the wall, locked her out of the house in winter, and bent a pairing knife blade in front of her.

Susan had help from her mother, father, and sisters-in-law to leave this abusive situation. They investigated shelters for her. Her father begged her to leave before her husband killed her. Her aunt also was supportive. Susan had help to pack her bags and to leave while her husband was away.

Studies on domestic violence indicate that the batterer wants control and the beatings are designed to get control of the woman’s behaviour and activities. Ganley notes that abusers use tactics of control not when they are angry but when they want something. The tactics, whether fists or sweetness, are meant to get the woman to comply. Victor Lewis of the Oakland [California] Men’s Project believes that many men are taught that they should get their way. They can push people around until they get it. If they can't get their way, they are not real men. Lewis contends that “we live in a society that believes at a deep unconscious level that men are in control and have control of women.” David Currie, chief social worker at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto, Ontario has written about male violence. He says that a

"major contributing factor to women remaining in violent relationships is the endorsement and teaching by our social institutions that women belong in the home, are less competent than men to succeed in the work force, should defer to the dominance of their husbands, and should be the primary emotional support of the family." 

For Susan, her husband’s great need to control her did not express itself just through physical violence. Her husband used
controlling behaviours by his attitude during child custody battles, in breaking restraining orders, and in deliberately violating agreements about the arrangements for child visitation. It takes a great deal of courage to live with these obstacles to a woman's wellbeing as well as the terrifying memories. Yet both Susan and Jessie have valiantly pressed on with their goals to have a better life. Clearly these are valiant women, yet both of them have had trouble seeing themselves in this way.

Some valiant women are saying "No" to domestic violence and saying "Yes" to life at great risk. They risk being killed; they risk leaving their homes for an unknown future; they risk the loss of their social status and contacts; they risk rejection by telling the secret about the way things really are; and they risk the destruction of their dreams and hopes. One has to be valiant to act on the truth which has so many risks attached to it.

Theologically, it is clear that by caring enough about their own bodies to say "No More", these women are caring for the body of Christ, for we are all one in Christ. They call it survival. Theologically, it is the recognition of their real worth in God's eyes and of their bodies as God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). I call it the first light of dawn, a resurrection.

A Gospel Issue: The Call to Be a Resurrection People

The Body of Christ is being battered again and again in homes across this country. Abused women are often isolated, rejected, betrayed, denied. Echoes from the passion story in Mark's gospel can lead us to recall that Jesus also knew what it was to be abandoned in the face of overwhelming odds.

Denial of the seriousness of domestic violence is widespread. Many people fear becoming involved in these situations. Many people on the sidelines would rather live in denial, which covers up fear, than face the truth of what is happening. As we have seen, these fears account for the minimalization of a woman's story—which occurs too frequently among pastors and parishioners. Mark's gospel recounts that when Jesus was taken by force, his friends were half asleep (unaware, in denial) and too frightened to acknowledge that they were a part of his life (betrayal). They failed to stand with him except to retaliate impulsively with violence, something which Jesus
Valiant Women

condemned. Here we should note the passion narrative from Mark’s gospel and consider obvious parallels to the present situation of survivors of domestic violence.

1. Referring to the disciples, the author of Mark says, “And they all forsook Jesus and fled” (Mark 14:50). We often abandon victims and survivors of domestic violence by fleeing from this issue out of fear. We flee by ignoring, excusing, or intellectualizing the problem, or by focusing on easier tasks.

2. When one of Jesus’ closest friends was asked about being part of Jesus’ life, Mark has the friend say, “I neither know nor understand what you mean” (Mark 14:68). Not knowing and not understanding the amount of domestic violence is quite common, yet a recent report stated that 31 percent of all women killed are murdered by their boyfriends, husbands, ex-spouses or partners; and 20 percent of marriages have acts of violence against the woman. In the United States, a woman is beaten every eighteen seconds. Despite these astonishing statistics, this problem has not had much attention as a Gospel issue.

3. Mark underlines the betrayal by a male friend, “[A]gain he denied it [association with Jesus]” (Mark 14:70). Denial of the issue by men (either by words or lack of action) leads to the betrayal of sisters. The resolution of domestic violence needs the active work of men.

4. Mark tells us that even Jesus himself could not seem to find God in the midst of the most extreme violence. “And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ” (Mark 15:34). Survivors of domestic violence often think that God is not with them. If God were there, the situation would change.

5. When the young man clothed in the white robe at the tomb called the women to be valiant in announcing the resurrection, they too, were terrified. They went out of the tomb and “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). We are often afraid to preach the good news of resurrection which in part is meant for actual life now and calls for an end to more violence.

We learn that the disciples, men and women alike, failed the body of Christ. Both groups were controlled by their fear. Mark invites us not to recoil from truth out of fear or misunderstanding like the disciples did that first time, but to proclaim
boldly the Gospel of the One raised out of death to life, even in the face of opposition.

For Mark’s community, opposition was in the form of persecution from the Roman government. For Christian facing the challenge of responding to domestic violence, opposition may also come from the government in the form of cutbacks to shelters. For example, on average across the country, one of every two women are turned away because of lack of space. More often, opposition within the church has its source in the fear of the enormity of the task before us, one which includes examining the ways in which our sacred texts, ecclesial practice and theology have been used overtly and covertly to justify such behaviours. For example, we need to address the interpretation of texts like “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands” from Ephesians 5:21–24 and show how this text has been misused—a practice which has contributed to the current situation of many women. We need to affirm and demonstrate mutuality by using positive examples of women in stories and sermons, especially examples which break stereotypes; to work for equal gender representation on committees; to invite women to speak their minds, to lead Bible studies, to pray in worship services, and so on. Above all, the church must remember that “sin” for women is not so much pride and selfishness, but too much self-sacrifice for others and too little regard for their own well-being.

The story in Mark’s gospel is left hanging, as if incomplete. Indeed, it is incomplete. As David Rhoads and Donald Michie have pointed out, Mark wants us to finish the story ourselves. What will we do with the Good News that Christ has overcome death? How is that good news in the lives of survivors of domestic violence?

A number of hints suggest how Mark hopes we would respond. One of these is from the third chapter of his gospel, where the author indicates that if we want to be part of Jesus’ family, we must be part of the lifegiving things which God is doing. When told that his mother and brothers were asking for him, Jesus replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And surveying those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3:31–35).
What, then, is God’s lifegiving will for the church as it tries to respond to the issue of domestic violence? Surely it is to learn all one can about domestic violence, to condemn it, and to support the victims physically, emotionally, and spiritually so that they become survivors on the road to more abundant life. More than that, we need to affirm everyone’s sense of self as precious, unique and powerful. I have noted resources in the endnotes.

From Fear to Valiance

Becoming an advocate for survivors of domestic violence will involve Christians in risk and the threat of retaliation. Jesus experienced these dangers many times in his challenge to the social and religious structures of his day. Men and women who speak out against violence against women may be in physical danger themselves, become shamed and isolated by others, or experience silencing tactics. They also will be challenged theologically. I shall give only two examples, and neither can be explored here fully.

1. The cross is a symbol of redemptive suffering, but it is often distorted to justify violence and to urge a battered woman to bear her cross as Jesus did. Such theological justification is irresponsible because it does not analyze the social and political powers which legitimate violence; it does not notice that the victim has not chosen the path of suffering; and it does not place Christ’s suffering in the context of the resurrection.

2. We need to be aware that a helpful message in one context is deadly in another. While the message that we need to focus more on community than on selfish individual needs is helpful for the powerful in the church, it may contribute to a woman’s staying in an abusive situation because she is used to putting the needs of others above her own and the message reinforces this behaviour. She needs to hear that her own needs are important theologically.

Christians from the beginning faced difficult challenges. Because of them, the author in Mark 14:1–9 provided another hint for the pathway ahead: a role model for all who would be disciples of Jesus. I believe that this role model can give us a vision of the church as we seek to respond to domestic violence. Whereas the disciples and the women at the tomb responded
with fear and silence, Mark tells us that a certain woman had the courage to proclaim her love for Jesus by valiant actions: by boldly entering a place where she put herself at risk, by facing reproach for violating social and religious custom, and by caring for Christ’s body with extravagant perfume. Her acts foreshadowed God’s extravagant action in the resurrection.

Mark’s gospel reminds us that to challenge social and religious custom inevitably leads to censure. It was the case with Jesus in his healing ministry and with this woman who anointed him. The response of many around her was quick: “And they reproached her” (Mark 14:5). But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing for me” (Mark 14:5).

It is no accident that Mark says that as long as the Gospel is told, this story will be lifegiving. It challenges and invites us. We have seen that sometimes people do not get involved in cases of domestic violence because of fear of the unknown and having to step into unfamiliar territory. To make matters more difficult, we have also seen that contemporary social and religious custom often still expects pastors and congregations to deny the truth about the extent of domestic violence. Governments continue to wear blinders by cutting funds to shelters. Theological writings need to reflect upon this social problem. Christ still waits for us in the homes across this country and requires acts of courage, generosity, and compassion toward his Body, these valiant sisters, survivors of domestic violence.

Notes

2 Facts sheet on Wife Assault, “Dispelling the Myths.” Ontario Women’s Directorate, 2 Carlton Street, 12th Floor, Toronto, ON M5B 2M9, (416-314-0300).
3 Abuse of men also occurs. See Roberta Morris, “Violence Against Women,” in Roberta Morris, Ending Violence in Families, a Training Program for Pastoral Care Workers (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1988) 17–32. “Emotional and verbal abuse of men does occur, but it usually does not accompany the same threat of physical violence and the power dynamic is distinctly different. Abuse of men is not usually reinforced by the social, religious and economic factors that are operative in women’s experience” (17). In ninety-five percent of domestic violence cases, it is men who commit acts against women.
4 Permission was granted by Susan and Jessie for the use of the interview material in this paper.


6 Physical abuse can include pushing and shoving, biting, choking, kicking, slapping, punching, throwing objects, forcing someone to be a passenger when driving recklessly, pulling hair, threatening with a weapon, stabbing, burning. Psychological abuse can include ignoring/belittling feelings, ridiculing, insulting, humiliating, controlling the money, blaming others for one’s own abusiveness, hurting or killing a family pet, threatening murder or suicide. In Canada, any forced sexual act is considered sexual assault and is a crime.

7 In the video Broken Vows, Janet, a survivor who had formerly experienced abuse put it this way, “I was surprised to find that God was with me even though the church was telling me I was wrong. My spirituality could be based on what I felt and who I was. I could tell other Christian women that God loves us and that we have basic human rights, basic dignity, and it is wrong when any person takes that away from us.”

8 Another woman stated that people would quote from the Bible and say that the husband is the head of the house. “People I loved and
respected in the church blamed me for breaking up the family.” See the video Broken Vows.
9 Ganley is a psychologist in Seattle, Washington. See the video Broken Vows.
11 Ibid.
12 Victor Lewis, in the video Broken Vows.
14 Facts sheet on Wife Assault, “Dispelling the Myths”.
18 Ibid.
20 See also Joy Bussert, Battered Women; From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment (Lutheran Church in America, 1986).
22 See the videos cited in n. 5. See also the church packets such as Broken Promises (1987), Division for Parish Life and the Division for Church and Society, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 1512 St. James Street, Winnipeg, MB R3H 0L2; Roberta Morris, Ending Violence in Families, Family Violence in a Patriarchal Culture: A Challenge to Our Way of Living (1988), The Church Council on Justice and Corrections. Available at 507 Bank Street, 2nd Floor, Ottawa, ON K2P 1Z5. Printed material and an audio cassette, $15.00; Hands to End Violence Against Women: A Resource for Congregational Use (1988), from the Women’s Inter-Church Council of Canada, 815 Danforth Avenue, Ste. 402, Toronto, ON M4J 1L2 (416-462-2528). $20.00 (a shorter edition for congregational study is available for $10.00); “No Fear in Love” (1988), a protocol on wife abuse for church staff prepared for Winnipeg


24 For example, Morris, *Ending Violence in Families*.


26 See “Surviving Within the System,” by an anonymous police officer, *Vis-à-Vis* 11/4 (1994) 10. Referring to his experience as a police officer, he says, “Taking an unpopular stand can be isolating, especially in a profession that relies strongly on teamwork.”

27 Smith, “We are Where God is,” 210.
APPENDIX ONE
Flow Chart for Handling Domestic Violence Crisis Calls

What is the problem?

Are you in immediate physical danger?

Yes

Are you in need of immediate medical care?

Yes

Obtain caller's address, place on hold, call ambulance.

Do you want to leave?

Yes

Can you leave safely?

No

Is the assailant there now?

No

Do you want to make an appt. to see a counselor?

No

How can I help you?

Yes

Obtain caller's address, place on hold, call ambulance.

No

How can I help you?

Do you have some place to go?

Yes

Do you have transportation?

No

Shall I call police/sheriff?

No

Shall I arrange for emergency shelter?

Yes

Neighbors, friends, relatives, cab?

No

How can I help you?

Will there be children with you? How many?

Call police/sheriff.