

Year A Proper 25
Cokato Evangelical Lutheran Church
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By Amy L. Hartman

“What if Jessica was your daughter?”

These are the words of an angry mother, as quoted in Nick Coleman’s article in the Star Tribune from this past Friday. Her daughter had been a waitress on one of the boats involved in the now infamous Vikings voyage on Lake Minnetonka. Jessica witnessed all that took place, was pressured to get involved herself, and is now feeling the effects of the experience. She has dreams every night – sounds like Post-Traumatic Stress to me. She has been ordered to not say anything about what happened. Her mother said, “She wants to get over it, but she isn’t getting over it.”

The mother also expressed her dismay that the Vikings – the team that she and her family used to bleed purple for – would show such a lack of respect for their fans on the boat, forcing them to observe such behavior. “They (the waitresses) have been polluted. Very little emphasis has been put on that. People just think, well, it can’t happen to my daughter. But it did happen to my daughter, and I have to figure out a way to help her deal with this.”

The article didn’t say this, but I believe the mother will be cheering for the Packers in today’s game. I say that as a lifetime Packers fan. And I’m not just picking on the Vikings here; the Packers have had their problems along these lines as well.

This story highlights for us what happens when trusted boundaries between people are broken. There is inappropriate behavior, trauma to innocent bystanders, and loss of public credibility – the trustworthy world that God would like for us doesn’t happen.

Luckily this mother found a way to express her anger through this article. She is no longer voiceless, and her words will wake up some folks to the negative impact of prostitution. She is creating a more just, trustworthy world with her words and actions. She is asking us to consider the humanity of the people involved; her daughter was not just a member of the crew. This is HER DAUGHTER. She asks us to think of her daughter as OUR DAUGHTER, and act accordingly.

Our first reading today was from the 19th chapter of Leviticus, which is a series of ethical commands for holiness or a life of godliness. It is the assigned Torah reading for the afternoon of Yom Kippur, which is celebrated annually around this time of the year. This text reminds us that, “I am the Lord, your God” and provides some boundaries for our life in community: You shall not render an unjust judgment.

You shall not slander.

You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor.

You shall not hate anyone of your kin.

You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

As we abide by these boundaries, we create with God – God creates through us – a trustworthy world. Verse 15 tells that justice means not to defer to the great, not to let the rich and powerful off the hook. This mother was bold and decided she was not going to defer to the great – the Vikings and their image – but instead speak for what mattered to her – her daughter’s life. In the process she gives us a glimpse of how to love your neighbor as yourself.

It’s always interesting to see what has gotten left out of the assigned readings. Lev. 19:29 says, “Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.” I think this mother asks us to think of all daughters as our daughters – that what gets done to one daughter impacts our humankind in a significant way. Instead of creating a more trustworthy world, there is destruction and despair.

As we read in Psalm 1, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”

I can imagine that whoever made the arrangements for this cruise thought they would be creating some happiness for the Vikings. I don’t see too much happiness now. These waitresses are scarred – not to mention the women being used by the players. What are their stories? How did they get caught in this mess? The cruise company is fighting for its reputation. I’m sure the families of the players are in turmoil. Even dreams of a new stadium are starting to seem like chaff that the wind drives away. I assert that it’s not just the crew, players, team, all of their families that have been affected by this mess. Our community, our state, the whole NFL, the city of Atlanta – we all have been impacted by this event.

And why did it happen?

People – even our former Governor Ventura - have bought into the lie – into the advice of the wicked – into the advice of an evil system of sexual exploitation. We have chosen to believe that being involved in commercial sexual exploitation – prostitution, pornography, and stripping – is harmless fun. No one will get hurt. Everyone will be happy.

That is, until it hits close to home, and all of a sudden, it’s about what people are doing to your daughter or your son. Then parents are left alone to ask, “Why doesn’t anyone see that my child is important? That this is my child’s life? Why doesn’t anyone see that my daughter could be their daughter?”

Bishop Craig Johnson of the Minneapolis Area Synod has formed a Bishop’s Task Force charged with implementing the ELCA Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation. I am one of the members of that Task Force. Our focus currently is the “Cherish Our Children Initiative” which is a congregation-based prayer and education effort to prevent the exploitation of our children.

When we were trying to decide what to call the initiative, some wanted “Cherish the Children” others wanted “Cherish Our Children” some wanted “Cherish all God’s Children.” We decided to go with “Cherish Our Children” with the understanding that Our meant “all of God’s” children, not just the ones in our family, our congregation, or our community – but ALL GOD’S CHILDREN.

As we cherish all of God’s children and delight in the law of the Lord, we will have true happiness. And because we have a foundation of God’s love for us, we can expose the lie of the

“sex industry” that this is harmless fun. Because we are rooted in the waters of our baptism, we can actually “see” the humanity of – dare I say we see Christ in - the people involved. Because God continues to say to us, “I am the Lord your God,” we can love the daughter or son of our neighbor as much as we love our own daughters, our own sons.

I would like to share with you a story which provides more insight into how we can love the daughter or son of our neighbor as much as we love our own children. This was written by a former board member of Adults Saving Kids, Loie, and published in their newsletter, The Stoplight.

"I've been thinking about our conversation. . .and I want you to know that I'll never go to one of 'those places' again."

That was Jim, a long-time friend, calling to assure me that he wouldn't frequent topless bars or strip joints anymore. I was surprised. Last we'd talked he was excited about visiting such places, especially Solid Gold. As he described it, the place was clean, comfortable, and tastefully decorated. The "dancers" were young, beautiful, and talented. The customers were polite and respectful. (There was the usual cheering and jeering, but no one grabbed the girls.) He saw it as a harmless way to have fun and to relieve his tension.

As a single parent for nine years, he dated very little. He told me he wouldn't think of dating just for sex -- that would be exploitive.

Prior to my involvement with Adults Saving Kids, my typical response to Jim would have been a quick, accusatory retort or a silent, condemning retreat. Even though I'd known him as a caring friend and a nurturing parent, I think I would have written him off as a jerk who objectifies women and supports businesses that exploit them. And Jim would have been free to continue enjoying his new *recreation*.

But this conversation took a different turn. With no planning or conscious effort, the knowledge, experience, and awareness I've gained working with Adults Saving Kids kicked in. I was able to stay in the conversation with Jim without making him bad and wrong.

In retrospect, my attention was on sharing myself authentically, not on criticizing or shaming Jim. I listened first, then shared *my* perspective. I didn't mince words nor did I attack. I simply gave him the facts as I knew them. "I've heard that strippers are often expected to do more than just strip. They're expected to prostitute themselves. Even if that's not true of most strip places, research shows that stripping is a major entry point into the world of prostitution. Since 80% or more of the women in prostitution have been sexually abused as children, getting into prostitution isn't a free choice. It's pre-conditioned. Physical abuse, drug addiction, venereal diseases, and unwanted pregnancies may come with the package."

Then I asked Jim to imagine his twelve-year-old daughter on stage...to picture her moving to the music...removing her clothing one piece at a time...and to put himself in the audience. Jim looked a bit uncomfortable and perplexed, but said nothing and the conversation moved to another topic.

A week later, Jim called. "I've been thinking about our conversation and I want you to know I'll never go to one of those places again. I'm embarrassed to say this, but I hadn't really given it much thought before. Imagining Jennifer working in one of those places really got to me. Thank you for being so open and direct. I truly value our friendship."

My purpose in sharing this story of my friend Jim is first, to encourage you to fully educate yourself on the issues of sexual exploitation. And second, to share your truths, thoughtfully and respectfully, whenever appropriate. Some men and women in your life may be just as uninformed as my friend Jim. Maybe they've never examined their values about the issue.

Loie concludes with: Be assured – speaking up makes a difference.

And God speaks to us again and again: I am the Lord, your God. I delight in you. No matter what you have done, I am the Lord your God. I DELIGHT IN YOU and I invite you to create with me a more trustworthy world, where all of my children – all of your children – all of your neighbors' children - are loved, respected, and cherished.

Thanks be to God! Amen.