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On forgiveness and childhood sexual abuse

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Study guide:

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On forgiveness and childhood sexual abuse

By Robert C. Blezard

Sexual abuse of children remains one of the most heinous problems in our culture. Studies show that as many as 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18. The abuse can have devastating, lifelong effects on victims. As Christians dedicated to protecting God's children, we can work to prevent abuse, to support victims and to help create a culture of safety for all.

Exercise 1: Rape of Tamar

The Bible's chilling account of the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon reveals many of the problems of sexual abuse of children, youth and young adults. Read 2 Samuel 13:1-22 and discuss:

- Walk through the story: What happens and why?
- What was inappropriate about Amnon's feelings for his sister?
- What (and whose) advice led Amnon to act on those feelings? What forces in our culture today encourage abusers to act?
- Though we often think of the stranger in the dark alley as the one who will victimize our children, experts say most abusers know their victims and are from a child's "safe" circles—school, family, church, sports or community organizations. How does this story support that reality?
- Experts say abusers often use their relationship with children to exploit them. Discuss the role of love and trust in Amnon's plot. How did he betray Tamar?
- Why did Tamar initially feel safe while alone with her brother in his bedroom? Why is (or is not) that level of trust appropriate in a healthy family?
- In resisting Amnon, are Tamar's words to him appropriate and truthful? Why is reason alone insufficient to stop him?
- Experts say the true incidence of sexual abuse and child sexual abuse is unknown because some victims never come forward to tell the police or the family members who could help them. How does Tamar respond to the assault?
- Verse 20 is important: Why and how is it that Absalom knows *exactly* what had happened between Tamar and Amnon, even though his sister is silent?
- Since Absalom apparently knew about Amnon's inappropriate feelings toward Tamar and suspected that he might act on them, what could he



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have done to protect his sister and prevent the assault (brainstorm at least five things)? Why did Absalom fail to act? To what degree is this pattern of denial and inaction a factor in child sexual abuse today?

- Experts say sexual assault victims sometimes fail to come forward because they believe nothing will be done to the abuser. Why would they believe that?
- When King David learns of Amnon's rape of Tamar, how is justice done? For Amnon, what are the consequences of his actions?
- Why does David fail to punish Amnon? How do you think this made Tamar feel?
- How is David's failure to act consistent with families or institutions that cover up incidents of child sexual abuse and actually protect the abuser? Thinking of cases that have been widely publicized in recent years, can you recall specific examples?
- What should David have done? How should families and institutions respond when they become aware of sexual abuse or child sexual abuse?
- Summarize the lessons learned from the story of Tamar.

Exercise 2: What is it?

What do think constitutes child sexual abuse? The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org) lists this definition on its "Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet": Child sexual abuse is any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Touching behaviors may involve touching of the vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks, oral-genital contact, or sexual intercourse. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposing the child to pornography.

Discuss:

- What is the difference between appropriate touching and inappropriate touching? When does it cross the line into child sexual abuse?
- Under what circumstances would watching a child cross the line into sexual abuse?
- Under what circumstances would photographing a child cross the line into sexual abuse?
- Why is it child sexual abuse to expose a child to pornography?

Exercise 3: Prevalent problem

- What words come to mind, and what emotions do you feel when you consider that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys is a victim of sexual abuse before age 18?



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- Does the enormity of the problem of child sexual abuse surprise you? Shock you?
- In light of these statistics, how might Christian communities work harder to keep our children safe?

Exercise 4: 'Forgiveness'

Jesus teaches us to forgive those who sin against us "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22).

- How would you define forgiveness? What does forgiveness do for the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven?
- Suppose someone has sinned against you. Under what circumstances might forgiveness be absolutely the appropriate response?
- Is it possible to be too forgiving?
- How might a misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:22 lead some victims to forgive too easily?
- Should forgiveness always come immediately? Should forgiveness be given freely and without conditions?
- Under what circumstances might forgiveness appropriately be withheld until certain conditions are right? What might be some appropriate preconditions?
- In her article, Pam Marolla describes how her abuser implored her to forgive him. Why did this cause her confusion and discomfort?
- How would you explain Matthew 22:18 to a victim of child sexual abuse?
- Marolla cautions that congregations have "to be careful" how they use words such as forgiveness. How should we teach and preach forgiveness in our communities?

Exercise 5: Theodicy

It's the question that has confounded faithful people for ages: Why does a good and all-powerful God allow evil in the world? In his explanation of the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), Jesus acknowledges that "children of the evil one" live alongside "children of the kingdom," but does not explain why God permits it. The theodicy question remains a mystery worthy of thought and discussion.

- How would you describe evil?
- Since God permits evil to exist, does that mean God approves of evil? According to Scripture, what does God think of evil?
- Since good and evil live side-by-side, is doing evil or tolerating it ever an



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appropriate choice for God's people? Why or why not?

- Since God permits evil to exist, should God's people be passive in the presence of evil, accepting it as part of the created order?
- What is our appropriate response to evil?
- How can this discussion inform our understanding of child sexual abuse and, more importantly, our response to it?

Exercise 6: '... for a reason'

Related to the theodicy question (above) are unhelpful ideas and phrases that seem to indicate God approves of evil and causes bad things to innocent people. Explore each of the following common phrases:

Everything happens for a reason.

- Everything may happen for a reason, but what reasons?
- Does everything happen for God's holy reasons?
- Does God inflict harm in order to teach us a lesson?
- For a victim of child sexual abuse, how could this phrase be painful?

God never gives us more than we can handle.

This is thought to be an oversimplification of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

- Is testing the same thing as suffering? In the context of 1 Corinthians 10, isn't Paul talking about testing as temptation to stray from God and toward sinfulness?
- Does Paul imply that God is the one who causes the testing?
- What assurance does Paul give us in our testing?
- Why is the phrase, "God never gives us more than we can handle," a poor paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 10:13?
- For a victim of child sexual abuse, why might it cause pain?

God is in control.

- You hear this a lot. What do you think it means?
- Does God direct everything that happens, good and evil, in our world?
- Are evil actions a manifestation of God's direct will?
- For a victim of child sexual abuse, why might this phrase cause pain?

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About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

He holds

degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg.

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- How could you explain this phrase in a way that might comfort a victim?
- What would be a more helpful phrase?

Exercise 7: Safety policies

As awareness of the prevalence of child sexual abuse grows, so does the number of churches that are working to educate members about the issue and make their congregations as safe as they can. Does your congregation have a child protection policy? If so, study it as a group and work on ways to make it effective in your community. If not, why not?

Discuss the wisdom of each of these common child-protection measures:

- Adopting a child-protection policy for your congregation, educating congregants about it and staying vigilant in enforcing its provisions.
- Requiring criminal background checks for volunteers and workers who work with children.
- Adopting a policy that an adult at church should *never* be alone with a child that is not his or her own.
- Requiring that a minimum of two adults to be present at all youth activities.
- Requiring that all classrooms and youth activity rooms have windows, or that doors be open whenever there are children there.
- Requiring that rooms be locked whenever they are not in use.
- Providing education and training to volunteers and staff about the signs of child abuse and child sexual abuse.
- Establishing a procedure for identifying, reporting and responding to suspected child abuse and child sexual abuse.

On forgiveness and childhood sex abuse

This isn't what you'd expect a pastor to say

By Pam Marolla

Recent revelations about abuse in the Duggar family, known for TLC's *19 Kids and Counting*, and the ensuing public discourse, has motivated me to write about my experience as an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

With the help of many years of therapy, particularly EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing; www.emdr.com), and the tender companionship of a husband who both gave me space and held me close when I tried to run or self-harm, I am where I am. Supportive friends, survivor networks and most certainly the grace of God also have made me strong. I'm a survivor. I haven't had nightmares or flashbacks in nine years.

Still, the Duggar story both triggered a lot of feelings and made me profoundly numb to emotion. Then there are those who cause further emotional and spiritual harm to incest victims by insisting on the need for forgiveness.

My story

Between the ages of 8 and 16, I was molested frequently by a family member who lived nearby. The setting was rural and remote. There were no neighbors to run to for help. If there had been the opportunity to break the silence, I likely wouldn't have taken it. He threatened me. I was ashamed.

When I finally told a few people, I minimized the abuse and the damage. I had no idea, then, that the impact of the abuse would follow me around like a hungry dog for so many years.

Each time my abuser was finished with me, he expressed remorse and told me I needed to forgive him. Coming from a churchgoing family, I felt the burden to forgive. I believed unforgiveness was sinful. So I tried, even praying with the few people I had told, asking that I might more sincerely forgive.

But I eventually realized that forgiveness lifted the burden of responsibility off the man who had molested me. Yet I still carried the nightmares, flashbacks, body image issues, the self-loathing and shame of one who had been abused. Since I couldn't blame him anymore because of that forgiveness, the only one left to blame for the horrible way I felt was myself.

From adolescence through my early 40s, I wanted to commit suicide but thought I would go to hell.

When I discovered I wasn't his only victim, I finally broke the silence with my hometown family. In doing so, I found that many of the people I was trying to protect already knew. Some told me to "get over it."

I don't go back home anymore. There are family members there whom I love and who have nothing to do with this. But it's difficult to tell who sides with my abuser and who just doesn't know what to say to me.

The echoes of his threats have hung over me my whole life and still do. The most difficult decision of my life was to not attend my mother's funeral. I loved her dearly and miss her still. But I choose to remain in safe supportive places now.

Wrestling with theodicy

I've been an ELCA pastor for more than 20 years. Theodicy (the question of why God allows evil) and I are old wrestling partners. I don't want my words to unintentionally cause harm to those who are struggling. I no longer believe suicide leads to hell, though part of me is glad I once believed that because I'm still here.

I don't trust anyone who thinks they are holier than someone else. There are far too many evil things that

many Christians keep hidden behind a facade of "moral superiority." I detest the phrase "Everything happens for a reason." The reason might just be selfishness, pride, greed, envy, licentiousness, sloth, lust or just stupid choices. God isn't trying to teach little rape

Since I couldn't blame him anymore because of that forgiveness, the only one left to blame for the horrible way I felt was myself.



Don't ever mistake forgiveness for taking the burden of the crime off the offender and placing it on yourself.

victims a lesson.

The church has to be careful about how it uses words. Forgiveness is a tricky word. Built into the Lord's Prayer, it's an unavoidable mandate of Jesus. Yet most Christians, if we are honest, have some definite double standards when it comes to who and what needs to be forgiven (or not).

If another driver hits your car, you expect restitution. If your house gets broken into, you don't inquire whether the robber is repentant. You call the police. Yet, if your daughter gets "broken into," she should forgive?

We simply don't know the harm we inadvertently inflict when insisting on human forgiveness.

Abuse leaves many layers of damage. Do whatever it takes to heal, layer by layer. If you want to forgive, that's fine if this is helpful for your journey. If it keeps you from eating yourself up with rage or bottling up all the emotions—do it. But don't ever mistake forgiveness for taking the burden of the crime off the offender and placing it on yourself. And don't ever do it because your abuser or anyone else demands it of you.

Download a study guide for this article at www.thelutheran.org (click on "study guides").

Pam Marolla tells survivors:

- It was not your fault.
- God is with you.
- God has already changed your name from "Shamed" to "Beloved."
- Keep telling your story until someone validates all those points for you and you start healing.

Anger and love

Whenever someone hears my story and expresses anger at my abuser and love for me, I experience healing.

Christian survivors of childhood abuse have often, in the name of forgiveness, held back their anger, turned it inward or misdirected it. They need to be reminded that this crime wasn't their fault. To heal, it's absolutely necessary to get angry at the right person—but not get stuck in the anger.

We also need to be fully known. Shame of childhood sexual abuse stays with a person a long time. Deep within them survivors have a place in their being that says, "If you knew all about me, there's no way you could love or even like me." Ask my husband how many times, early in our relationship, I tried to run away.

I've grown my group of trusted confidants. They grieve with me over the little girl no one helped. They rejoice with me in the strength and security of the woman I am now. We share each other's sorrows and joys. It's true community.

It's a gift to discover true community through risking being genuine with others. And in finding true community, it's possible to find truer healing of spirits, lives, relationships and more. Coming around full circle— isn't this the gift we seek in forgiveness? □



Author bio:

Marolla is pastor of First Lutheran Church, Galesburg, Ill.