

Teen Dating: Abuse, Healthy Relationships and Empowerment  
A Sermon in Three Voices  
Palm 124; Genesis 1:26-28a; Psalm 139:13-15; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26;  
Matthew 7:12; 1 Corinthians 3:15-17; Galatians 3:28  
Holy Trinity UMC  
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This morning we have a heaven-sent opportunity to consider one of the most important issues of our time: teen dating abuse. We approach this issue not just as a random group of people, but as people of faith.

Usually, we wrestle with particular Bible readings from the lectionary. But today we are going to consider teen dating abuse in light of some of the major tenets of our faith. These tenets are woven throughout our Scriptures, and have been important to our mothers and fathers in faith across different centuries, different writers, different cultures. This gives us the opportunity to take a step back and look at Scripture, and at our faith, from a 30,000-foot level. It's like being in an airplane and looking down to see the whole vast history of faith laid out before you. From this elevation, some things really stand out.

We can take this 30,000-foot approach to considering teen dating abuse also. We can look at abuse in teen dating relationships as an interpersonal issue, but we can also take a step back and see it as a community issue. Personally, what can we do to support our friends, our children, and our loved ones who have survived abuse? How can we use our credibility as friends, teammates, or authority figures to challenge people close to us when they hurt or disrespect their partners?

On a community level, how can we support standards that make it easier for teens to have good relationships? And as a community, adults and teens, how can we empower teens to make their own decisions on these issues?

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From the beginning of time, human beings have looked at themselves, and at one another, and at the wider world around them, and asked, "Who am I?" "How did I get here? "

Our mothers and fathers in faith had an answer to that question, and, despite our intervening scientific and technological advances, this answer still holds important truths for us today. The story is familiar to all of you, so I'll just read a bit:

**Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness , , , So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. And God blessed them. . . . God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. Genesis 1:26-28a, 31**

Ultimately, then, we are a good part of God's good Creation. But, you might be thinking, that is humankind in general, but what about me in particular? For this, let's turn to the voice of the Psalmist, another of our forebears in faith, who addresses her Creator like this:

**For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works;**

**that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.**

**Psalm 139: 13 - 15**

**We are created in God's image, created GOOD, fearfully and wonderfully made, known and loved by God.**

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So if we are created inherently good, what kinds of relationships do we deserve, and what do we want? What strikes me in the classroom responses is that, despite how differently males and females are pressured to act, I hear very similar answers from all genders and all ages.

They tell me they want respect, a relationship between equals, where my needs and thoughts are as important as yours. To begin to put this into action, all we have to do is listen to each other. We each have boundaries, what we're OK with or not OK with, and we're not going to pressure each other to change them. We're in a relationship, but still individuals, still ourselves.

They tell me they want trust; the person who respects and trusts me does not have to look through my phone to see who I texted. They don't need to text me every two minutes to ask where I am ("Yup, still at church.") You know that the two of you are together, not because one of you can't escape, but because you choose to be with each other.

They tell me they want communication. This lets them know how each person is feeling and helps them work out stress in the relationship. It also helps them get to know each other, and it builds intimacy between them.

Healthy relationships can require effort. They're something that all of us, teens and adults, strive for, with some moments of great success, and some moments of mistake and failure. These healthy relationships are what we deserve. There can often be a lot of pressure to just be in a relationship with anyone, even if we're being hurt by our partner.

One thing that we can do is by support the teens we care about when they're single, and helping them be comfortable in their singleness, because once people are OK being single, it's easier for them to demand the good relationships they deserve.

Of course, human beings being what they are, it wasn't long before we began to ask other questions. "Who are we?" "What is our identity as a people?" One identity-defining moment in our faith history comes from the Exodus story. In this story, God hears the cries of the oppressed Israelites in Egypt, and moves in human history to rescue God's people from enslavement and oppression. Again and again in human history, God is revealed to be on the side of the oppressed.

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Teen dating abuse is another example of oppression. What does it look like? What is it?

Our first thoughts often go to physical abuse: slapping, pushing, punching. It can be more subtle though: grabbing someone, throwing things, pinching, or driving recklessly during an argument.

Verbal abuse often comes first, although we sometimes dismiss it as "drama". This could be yelling, swearing, putting someone down, constantly checking up on someone, or making threats. We hear all kinds of threats, including "Do this or I'll break up with you," "Do this or I'll spread rumors about you," "If you leave me I'll hurt you," and "If you leave me, I'll hurt or kill myself, and it will be your fault."

Emotional abuse can be the fuzziest, the hardest to identify, but the people we work with say that the emotional abuse continues to hurt them long after the physical pain has healed. One very common tactic is isolation, separating someone from their friends, their family, or the things that they like to do. We also see one person trying to control the other person, intimidating or humiliating them, and being very possessive. We also see lots of denial and blame.

We also see intimate abuse from one partner to the other, and this falls into two categories: pressure and assault. In terms of sexual pressure, we see threats as well as manipulation ("If you really loved me, you'd do this with me.") Assaults are any activity that's done without both people wanting to, and both people giving permission. We see that choice, that consent, taken away in many ways, including force, threat, age difference, alcohol, or simply already being in an abusive relationship. If someone is asked a yes or no question, and they know they can be hurt if they say no, their 'yes' really doesn't mean anything.

What makes it so hard to leave? One of the biggest factors in dating violence is the cycle of the relationship.

At the beginning, everything is wonderful, this is what we call the hearts and flowers phase. If she slurps her soup, it's the most beautiful sound you've ever heard. If he gives you a clump of dirt he picked up while he was thinking about you, it's going up in your locker.

Even in a healthy relationship, this phase doesn't last forever. It turns out you're dating a real person, and tension, or stress, begins to build up. It could be about little things (You love Twilight, I hate Twilight); or it could be about big things. Maybe our friends don't get along. Maybe we have trust issues. This is where the cycles of abusive and healthy relationships split off.

In a healthy relationship, people communicate about the stress. They talk and listen. Hopefully, they're able to find a compromise, a common ground, and they're back to hearts and flowers. Sometimes, there can be no compromise, and if it's a big issue, another healthy option is to break up. Breaking up can be extremely painful, but in the end it can be healthier than being miserable and stressed out, or abused. (or abusive).

But in abusive relationships, one person chooses to deal with their stress by taking it out on the other person, by taking control over them. That abuse may not be physical, maybe it's verbal. Then, the abusive partner rushes back to hearts and flowers, and all of a sudden, this person who made me feel so terrible about myself is once again the nicest person in the world. And the cycle continues. It's important to understand that the hearts and flowers phase is just as much a tool for keeping someone in the relationship as the abuse.

Now, this situation is difficult enough when it confronts adults, but teens have an extra problem. There can be a great distance between teen survivors and the agencies and people who can support them. This is partly an information gap. Maybe the teen doesn't know this agency exists, or maybe it's unclear if the agency serves teens, or just married adults. Alienation can also complicate this support. Maybe I'd like to tell my parents, but I'm afraid they'll force me to stop seeing this person. Maybe I'd call the police, but the last time I saw a police officer was when my friend's party got busted. Maybe I'd go to my teacher, but I'm in trouble at school because the relationship stress is messing up my attendance and behavior and grades.

That's why it's so important for us as adults to reach out to teens in ways that are accessible and empowering. We need to meet teens where they're at, whether that's schools, other youth programs, and online. There are some great websites where teens can get information and support, including [loveisrespect](#), [thesafespace](#), and [athinline](#). To

empower teens, we need to let them decide what steps to take to help themselves, and support them in that, even though there are certain steps we might want our loved one to make. This open line of communication and support is essential if we want someone to own their decisions and take back control over their life.

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Generations later, another of our faithful forebears articulated our covenantal relationship with God in terms of our bodies. We who follow Christ are, he said, members of the Body of Christ, each of us with our special gifts and graces, each of us unique, but each of us, because of the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit, an indispensable and respected part of the Body of Christ. Paul goes on at length about how each member of the body should be honored and respected:

**The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body . . . that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.**

**1 Corinthians 12:12-26**

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## Compassion for Survivors

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” When a dating partner causes our friend, our child, our classmate to suffer, all of us suffer. What can we do, and what can you do, to help this person?

Before we can help effectively, we need to overcome a strong psychological and social barrier, and that is the tendency to blame the victim. Blaming the victim maintains our illusion of a safe, predictable world. As a result, we frequently hear questions like,

What did she do to get him so mad?

Look at the way he lets his girlfriend treat him. He’s so weak.

Yeah, she’s asking for help today, but they’ll be right back together tomorrow.

When someone is abused – no matter what type of abuse it is – it is never their fault. It is always the choice of the person who abuses them.

Many people claim that in the moment of abuse, they lost control, they snapped, and therefore they’re not fully responsible for their actions. Several years ago The Oakland Men’s Project addressed this in a dialogue between a facilitator and an abusive partner. Although this scenario involved adults, the dynamics hold true in teen relationships as well. The abusive partner had said he had snapped, hit his partner in the stomach, and stormed off to the garage. The facilitator dug below the surface, questioning that excuse.

(F) “Why didn’t you hit her in the face?”

(AP) “Last time she got a bruise, and people started asking questions. I didn’t want to deal with that.”

(F) “Was there anything else you did before you went into the garage.”

(AP) “Yeah, I pulled the phone out of the wall.”

(F) “Why?”

(AP) “Well, last time she called the police, and I didn’t want that hassle again.”

In this way, the facilitator walked the abusive partner through the so-called loss of control, and control, pointing out the series of choices he had made in order to abuse more effectively and avoid getting caught.

In relationships feelings of stress and frustration sometimes come up, that’s normal, but we always have the choice of how we deal with those emotions.

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So we've avoided victim-blame, now we can support this person we care about who's been abused.

One of the single best things we can do is listen. In this abuse, our friend or loved one's power and control has been taken away. When we're there to listen, that gives them a chance to get their voice back, which helps them get back some of the power and control that's been taken away. One of the most difficult parts of listening, especially for adults and male peers, is holding back from offering solutions. Someone may not be looking for a solution yet; she or he might just want us to listen while they vent about how they feel scared, or embarrassed, or betrayed. But that listening is extremely important.

Before we can support, we need to believe this person. Unfortunately, there is a myth that claims many people lie about abuse, but that's not what the facts show us. Rates of false reports are no higher than for other types of violent crime, and the odds are overwhelming that this person is telling us the truth.

Let them know the abuse is not their fault. Even if this is obvious to you, it might not be obvious to them. Listen without judgment. One of the most common forms of judgment we hear is, "Why are you still with this person?" Keep in mind that it takes an average of 5-7 tries to leave, and there are many practical and emotional barriers to leaving.

Unless you are a friend or mentor of the abusive partner, don't confront the abuser. Even though you naturally want to protect your friend or loved one, the abusive partner is less likely to react against you, and more likely to get more abusive towards the survivor.

Offer options instead of advice. Don't say, "Here's what you have to do." Support the survivor's decisions, even if you disagree, or if they're not ready right now to take all the steps that you want them to take. Like listening, this support helps the person you care about to regain the control that's been taken away.



**Despite its covenantal relationship with God, Jesus was not born into a perfect community. People were enslaved. Rome was oppressive. War was common. Women were often considered possessions. Women held less social power than men, and were often not respected. In this**

world, Jesus was radical indeed. He talked to women! He touched and healed women, even unclean women. In fact, the only person who ever won a theological argument with Jesus was the woman at the well.

Jesus' message was clear: in the eyes of God, all are equal.

The message was so clear that Paul carried on the tradition, declaring,

**There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28**

Because we are the body of Christ, we treat everyone as equals.

This is a foundation stone of the Christian community.

Even Scriptures that have been misused to support gender inequality must be re-interpreted in light of this radical message. We've all heard Ephesians quoted to support the subjugation of women. "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." That sounds pretty clear, and it's what Paul's audience would have expected to hear. But then Paul gives us the punchline. Talking specifically to people in intimate relationships, Paul says, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." And, further on we are enjoined to love our partners as we love our own bodies,

**"For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body."**

As members of this community, we wield power to impact the people close to us, and to set standards as a community. When people decide to abuse, they don't make that choice in a vacuum; they do so convinced that their friends would act the same way in their situation. When we speak up, we challenge that illusion.

Community standards can support relationship abuse, or can challenge it. One important standard is the acceptance of violence. When we see violence and aggression as a means to solve problems, we eventually bring it into our relationships. This doesn't have to be just physical violence. If I witness a lot of verbal aggression, or emotional control, or bullying around me, it's easier for me to justify those behaviors in a relationship.

Our views on gender roles for males and females also impact the health and safety of our relationships. Equal power and equal opportunity lead to equal, healthy relationships among all genders.

Power, and its definition by the community, influences relationship dynamics. One way to look at this is the distinction of "power over" versus "power with". If one of us has to have power over the other, if this relationship has to have a winner and a loser, then abuse is very likely. But if we can share power with each other, if what's good for you is also good for me, then we both win.

Privacy and Silence are the last community standard I'll talk about. The question is, what do we as friends do to break the silence? It's critically important to speak up, not just about a specific relationship, but about dating abuse in general. The more we break that silence, the easier it is for friends to come to us for help in times of need.

Finally, there are many ways that communities take action against teen dating violence. Some are formal, some aren't. There are groups like Mentors in Violence Prevention that help teens respond as bystanders. Next Tuesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, is White Ribbon Day in MA, when men and boys wear white ribbons to challenge violence against women. And every day, there are friends talking with friends, parents talking with children, teammates talking with each other, older teens talking with the younger teens who look up to them. These steps, big and small, are where we build safety, health, and empowerment.

And safety, health, and empowerment are critical if we are to live the lives that Jesus hopes for each one of us. **For Jesus said: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)**