

August 10, 2014

Lakewood UMC Sermon Title: "Are you safe?"

Scripture: Matthew

Good Morning. The scripture that we read this morning talks about a woman who was an outcast and lived in isolation. She saw herself as unworthy and undesirable but she longed for wholeness. She found wholeness when she approached Jesus believing that if she just touched His robe, she would be whole. My name is Gail and I am here this morning to share with you that after decades of living as a victim, I now live as a survivor because of the love and grace of Jesus Christ. I know that sexual abuse is a very sensitive subject but we read about it every day. It is international, national, local, religious and sports news. We hear so much about those who commit the offenses and crimes, but there is one thing we never talk about and that is how victims find healing. It is not by financial compensation; that does not heal the wounds at all and the journey to healing is often difficult.

I must share some statistics. Surveys tell us that one out of three women and one out of five men experience abuse before the age of 18. There are all levels of assaults; inappropriate jokes, pornography, and what we allow our children to watch on TV are forms of assault. And then there are the more serious crimes. I believe that an assault is anything that dishonors God's intended relationship between men and women, husbands and wives, and adults and children, but the statistic that troubles me the most involves children. We teach stranger danger in our schools and that is a very important thing to teach. However less than 20% of those who sexually assault children are strangers. Eighty percent of those who hurt children are known to the child and this leads to toxic secrets and the destruction of the family.

The details of what happened to me as a child are not important today, what is important is that we understand how a child's life dramatically changes at the moment of the first assault and these changes often become a life sentence of shame, self-loathing, feeling unlovable, stupid and many other negative feelings. I do remember very clearly what happened that day in the wooded area of the pasture on my uncle's farm. The plan was well orchestrated. My brother who was five years older than me, three cousins and three neighborhood boys were there. Although my brother did not commit the assault, he could have saved me. He knew about the plan. What he did do was to walk me out of the woods telling me how bad I had been and that if I would do whatever he told me to do from now on, he would not tell mother and dad how bad I had been. I remember dinner with four of them around the table and I remember the ride home. But, I ask you, how does a child get up the next day? I don't know; I can't remember.

In my family a quiet child was a good child and so it was easy to be reclusive. There was not a safe place to fall. We were not an affectionate family so I did not have to worry about a hug or a kiss that might lead to tears and questions. Experts say that the most important safety net we can offer our children is the knowledge that they can tell us anything that happens to them. Predators are able to recognize those children who do not have that protection. What I had to fear every day was that I would upset my brother and he would tell. My brother had that power over me his entire life. Even as adults, if he was coming to visit, I would frantically clean my house. What if he found something wrong?

I do not go to high school reunions. High school years are not happy memories and I have no desire to revisit them. We hear so much about bullying and bullying has always happened although not as quickly as today's cyber bullying. My maiden name was Stubbe and my high school nickname was "boobie". It may not seem so bad, but when you stack that nickname on top of what I experienced, it was huge. It was during high school that I began to be driven to perfection in everything I did. I play the piano as a hobby and I can still remember the exact mistakes I made during performances accompanying the high school chorus. The weight of my shame and the drive for perfection began to take a huge toll on me. I began to suffer from depression in nursing school at what is now UPMC. I think I remember every mistake I ever made. I could not forgive myself for anything. You see, I was a bad person who was desperately trying to be good.

Only by God's grace I married one of the kindest men on the planet although he is aggressively passive to a fault. I deliberately reverse those words. We met at Wesley Woods when I was the camp nurse and he was on the grounds keeping staff. Thankfully our marriage is based on friendship; parts of our marriage have been described as hollow. You see, I was always in control. I had a great need to be in control. I vowed I would take what had happened to me to my grave so no one would be affected but me. But, have you ever seen the commercial that asks, "Who does depression hurt? It hurts everybody." That was our life. I have hurt so many people. I have built walls that kept people out of our lives. If somebody wanted to be my friend, I would only let them get so close and then I would get rid of them. They had done nothing wrong but I did not feel worthy of their friendship. I always had a smile on my face that spoke untruth. I seemed self-sufficient, happy and in control but actually I was dying inside. The only time I said anything to John was one Sunday afternoon. I was watching TV upstairs and something came on TV about a rape. I ran down stairs and shouted at him, "I suppose you think you are the only man who has ever had me!! Well, you better think again!!!" I ran back upstairs, slammed the door and locked it and we never talked about it.

Although I functioned as a wife, mother and nurse, over time I began to battle worsening depression. I experienced frequent flashbacks to the little girl walking out of the woods to the barn and then she would be coming out of the woods again. She did this walk over and over until I thought I would truly lose my mind. I could not see her face, just a little blond girl staring at the ground. Oh how I wished that I could reach for her but she would never look at me. I worked with psychiatrists and psychologists and I took anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications. But I just couldn't seem to stop her. PLEASE HEAR ME VERY CLEARLY. I BELIEVE THESE CLINICIANS AND THOSE MEDICATIONS HELPED ME IMMENSELY AND I FEAR THAT WITHOUT THEIR HELP I MIGHT NOT BE HERE TODAY. IF YOU ARE TAKING MEDICINES, NEVER STOP TAKING THEM UNLESS ADVISED BY YOUR PHYSICIAN!! One psychologist that I worked with had me take the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory and he called me one evening and asked how much I knew about test construction. I told him I knew nothing about test construction and he told me the results showed I was one of the most depressed people he had ever met and he wanted to know how suicidal I was. I told him I was not suicidal and he called me a liar.

I do not know how our marriage survived. I would call John many times a day telling him that I didn't know how I was going to get through the day; maybe even the next hour. What a cry for help!! It became a burden to him. I hated intimacy and when I heard our pastor say during Disciple Bible Study, that intimacy between husband and wife is one of God's greatest gift to humanity, I thought he was sick. Many other symptoms appeared including not being able to make eye contact with people. I think you get the picture.

In 2006 my world of control collapsed. John and I were handed a form for safe sanctuaries because we do the music with the kids in Sunday school. We were sitting in our family room filling out the form and on the back was the question, "Were you as a child ever sexually assaulted or sexually molested?" Please check the "yes" box or the "no" box. My world fell apart!! I can still remember the adrenalin rush and the flight and fright panic. After several days of horrendous depression and flashbacks, I decided that I had three options. I could lie on the form which seemed unreasonable to lie on a church form. I could leave the church I love but then I would have to lie because people would be asking why I had left. Or, I could tell the truth. We had a new pastor. He had been at my church for about 6 weeks and I didn't know him. But hiding in a parking lot 30 miles from my house I called his cell phone. Oh how I prayed he would not answer. But he did. I remember saying that I could not answer the question on the back of the form for safe sanctuaries because the answer is so deeply hidden in my heart. I said I did not know why I was being asked that question, I would never hurt a child; I would be the last person to hurt a child. And then Pastor Darrell said, "Gail, I do not know what form you are talking about", and I did not tell him the question. Then he said, "I think we need to talk." Now I was really panicked.

A few days later I handed him the form. He read the question and I will never forget what he said next, 'Gail, I am so sorry you were asked that question and I am sorry for what has happened to you. But, now that you have been asked, I wonder what this has done to your marriage?' I threw up my hands in a defensive position and said that we did not have time to go there. And he said, "Oh, but we do." The journey began. We agreed to meet after Disciple Bible study – the longest 150 minutes of my life. I could not believe I was sitting in a room with somebody who knew. I wondered what he was thinking. What an awful person he must think that I am. The study ended and we went to his office. I felt like a pressure cooker lid was blowing off my soul. I do not remember much of what I said that day except, "There were seven of them....." Pastor Darrell told me that he was going to order a couple of books for us to study and that he wanted me to journal every day until we met again. I remember that night getting out pencil and paper thinking that I would not have a clue what to write but I was determined to try. This is how my journaling began. "Dear Little Girl in the Pasture, you are part of me and I am all of you and together we should be one but we are separated by sadness." And I wrote and I wrote.

There is so much to tell about the journey. I remember the day that Pastor Darrell told me that none of this was my fault. He said that I was the victim of a cruel and calculated act. Absolutely none of this was my fault. He said that I was an intelligent woman and my brain knows the truth but my heart does not believe. We have to find a way to connect the 15 inches between your heart and your head. I hung my head in shame and I could not look at him.

I remember the day that Pastor Darrell said to me that my emotions were asystolic. I just looked at him. He said, "You do know what that means, don't you?" I said, "I better, I am a nurse." If you are asystolic and they hook you up to an EKG machine you are flat line and you have gone to glory. You will not be back. What he was saying was that all my emotions were below the dead line – the depression - the anxiety -the shame- the self-loathing –the feeling ugly – feeling stupid – unlovable- void of gifts and the list continued. We decided that our goal would be that I would" blip" above the flat line and have a positive emotion. I remember calling him one day and saying that I think I had a happy emotion. Later I was reading a book and it said that victims of assaults often try to think their emotions because they are so afraid to feel. I spent a lot of time praying and telling God that I was a broken vessel and that I was going to surrender to Him. I admitted my exhaustion from trying to control everything. One day I

stepped outside our back porch and I looked to the heavens. I had spent my life looking at the ground to avoid eye contact. But this day I was reminded that this was a day the Lord had made and, I too, I Gail, was allowed to rejoice in it and I began to take baby steps out of my depression.

I remember the day that we sent the little girl, my pain, to wait for me at the feet of Jesus. You see, I had watched her walk the pasture for decades and I needed her to be in a safe place until I was healed enough to be one with her. I needed to forgive her; accept her. I began to substitute my memory of her in the pasture to one of her touching Jesus' robe. I had thought of her every day: sad, alone, confused, bewildered and afraid. She was dead to life. I wanted to be one with her but I did not know how. Now she was safe. I saw her there many, many times. Eventually, I began to see Christ's eyes when I pictured her. It took me a while to understand that I could see His face because I was now one with her. Since she was sent to His feet, I have never flashed back to the woods. Sadly, there have been other little girls and I continue to work to be one with them. Layers of the onion continue to peel as I am able to handle them. I asked Pastor Darrell why it is such a slow process and he said that if you recalled all that had happened at once you would be crushed by the load. All things in God's time.

John and I began to take classes at Ashland Theological Seminary on woundedness and the Holy Spirit. I picture my relationship with Christ as a vertical one that keeps me in balance on my walk on earth. Dr. Terry Wardle who teaches at Ashland calls it homeostasis. When pain occurs, a loss of a loved one for example, we are knocked off homeostasis. But we, by faith, come back to balance because of our relationship with Christ. We touch His robe.

Perhaps you are wondering why a woman my age is sharing her life of chaos. In May of 2009 it became very clear to me that God was calling me to help others. I do not write poetry. I have never been able to write poetry but on May 7, 2009, I woke up at 3:30 am and wrote this poem returning to bed at 5am.

#### A TRUSTED EARTH FACE

The moment it happened my soul went into arrest,  
The devil cheered: I've claimed another – her life is a mess.  
Where was God when this happened to me?  
He cried for His child through His pain she couldn't see.

Maybe it happened one day in the barn's hay,  
But wherever it did, you heard someone say,  
Listen to me, you've been bad – you must not tell.  
The devil's heart soared: you're now locked in my cell.

I've been bad? I'm confused. I don't understand!!  
I've always told mommy and she'd take my hand.  
He's right; I've been bad my heart starts to say,  
Maybe if I'm quiet it will all go away.

Suddenly ugly, dirty and cheap,  
The feelings of worthlessness now begin to creep  
Into every corner of a once innocent life;  
I'll just keep smiling, it will mask all the strife.

I'll be good. I'll be perfect, they'll never know,  
The pain is still there, it won't cease to flow.  
The energy, the drive, it all seems so right  
But my heart beats in conflict night after night.

Oh, God!! I need help; give me a trusted earth face,  
Someone who can help me find your amazing grace.

It's time that she accepts my gift of freewill  
To face or pain or will she choose to remain still?  
I know that her head has been filled with great lies,  
Her heart needs to acknowledge it must come alive.

My soul that arrested now begins to feel.  
My heart once so wounded finally can heal.  
For God in His wisdom has kept offering grace.  
And now that shines forth in the smile on my face.

Written by Gail Fees, May 7, 2009 at 3:30am

Dedicated to Rev. Darrell L. Greenawalt, BFA, M DIV

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I encourage you today that if you have a deep wound that you have been trying to control and keep hidden, be it my wound or one of so many deep wounds, take it to the feet of Jesus, touch His robe and look into His face and seek His healing grace. He already knows every detail of our past, but He desires to listen to the whole story. He wants to hear the cost of your wound; the rage and the pain. He waits for each of us and he accepts us. He offers freedom from the pain and will help us write the next chapter of homeostasis with Him. And if you are called to be a trusted earth face, I pray that that is exactly what you will be. If you are not absolutely sure that you are safe, please excuse yourself from the moment. So much damage can be done when someone repeats what they are told in hope of trust. Being a trusted earth face is a privilege; a privilege to go on a journey of healing.

John and I have had the privilege to be trusted earth faces many times in the four years of our ministry and this is what we say when someone says I have never told anybody before. We say, "Today you have and thank you for trusting me. I am safe and I will be praying that God will bless you with a special support person." We never ask what happened. That is not for us to know. God never intends for us to go on the journey of healing alone and he will provide. Please never tell someone to "forgive and forget", after all it was so long ago. The day I forget I will either have dementia or I will be with my savior in glory. Dr. Wardle says the church asks people to forgive too soon. Like a physical wound that must be cleared of infection, our spiritual wounds cannot be healed until they are drained of the pain and contamination. Asking people to forgive too soon is like a physical wound covered with a scab before healing has occurred. The wound will only get worse. Forgiveness comes in time after you have walked through the memories, the pain, expressed your hurt to Jesus, touched His robe and experienced His healing grace. Only then can we begin to experience the abundant life that Christ offers. God bless each of you!! I pray that you are "safe" trusted earth faces – brothers and sisters in Christ!!