



Connecting Faith and Life

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Session at a Glance

NFL player Ray Rice's assault of his then fiancée, Janay, highlights the ongoing problem of domestic violence. What questions and concerns have emerged from this incident? How does Christian faith lead us to minister with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence?

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Domestic Violence and Faith

by Mike Poteet

Staring Into the Dark Hole

Since 1987, October has been designated Domestic Violence Awareness Month in the United States. This October, domestic violence was already in the public eye due to a series of incidents involving professional football players.

The most publicized incident centered around two videos showing Ray Rice, at the time a Baltimore Ravens running back, assaulting his then fiancée, now wife, Janay. In the first video, which surfaced in February, Rice drags an unconscious Janay from a hotel elevator. The second, which emerged in early September, shows what happened inside that elevator: Rice punched her in the face. Five months after the first video's release, the National Football League (NFL) suspended Rice for two games, a disciplinary action roundly criticized as too light—"more farce than punishment," comments novelist and essayist Roxane Gay. Soon after the second video became public, the Ravens cut Rice from the team, and the NFL suspended Rice indefinitely. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell calls the second video "extremely clear, extremely graphic, and . . . sickening."

"But what did Goodell or anyone else expect the video to show?" asks sportswriter Mike Florio. "What's not clear, graphic, or sickening about a criminal complaint signed by a police officer that accuses Rice of doing precisely what the video showed him doing?"

We shouldn't have to see such abuse to believe it happens, but the Rice videos are, as journalist Ian Brown calls them, "our latest chance to stare into the dark hole of domestic violence." Our reactions to what we see can show both how our awareness of the problem has increased and what we must still do to address it.

The Scope of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence doesn't usually make headlines, but sadly it's a common occurrence in the United States. According to statistics compiled by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), one in three women has experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner. For 3.2 million women, that violence is "severe." Less frequently, but no less seriously, men are victims: One in ten has been stalked, physically harmed, or raped by an intimate partner. Domestic violence constitutes 15 percent of all violent crimes.

Incidents involving celebrities should remind us that anyone can be a victim of domestic violence. "It's important to note," says Nanci Kreidman of the Domestic Violence Action Center in Hawaii, "that domestic violence crosses all socioeconomic classes, professions, education levels, religious and ethnic groups. It's not just the poor

Core Bible Passages

Several Hebrew prophets picture God as Israel's husband (for example, **Isaiah 54:5**; **Jeremiah 31:32**). Some texts, such as **Hosea 2:14-20**, show tender love in this marriage; others depict a relationship broken by Israel's idolatry, which provokes God's furious response.

In **Ezekiel 16**, God vows to punish Israel, pictured as a woman handed over, naked and helpless, to abusive lovers (**verses 36-41**). Similarly, **Ezekiel 23** sees the Northern and Southern Kingdoms as sisters, abandoned by God to former sexual partners who harm and humiliate them. Such disturbing symbolism has been used to justify abusive treatment of real women, and victims of domestic violence (as well as other readers) can find such texts a terrifying portrait of God.

Ephesians 5 instructs wives to "submit to their husbands as if to the Lord" (**verse 22**). This text, too, has potential to reinforce harmful behavior. We must read the verse in light of what immediately precedes it—a command for spouses to "submit to each other out of respect for Christ" (**verse 21**)—and what follows it: an admonition for husbands to love their wives "as they do their own bodies" (**verse 28**).

When Jesus taught his followers to turn the other cheek (**Matthew 5:39**), he was telling them to reject revenge, not to willingly place themselves at risk of abuse. Jesus, consistent with Scripture's total witness, reveals God as loving, forgiving, and making peace.

and uneducated." In fact, educated and professional victims may feel more shame, from others and themselves, because they think, "These things shouldn't be happening to me."

Domestic violence does, however, disproportionately affect some populations. Women living in poverty, for example, have "fewer options for economic self-sufficiency and social support systems with little ability to offer financial help," explain researchers Andrea Hetling and Haiyan Zhang. These women feel "more trapped in unhealthy relationships" in which they are at risk. Black women, too, face greater risk: According to *The Dallas Morning News*, they are "about three times more likely to die at the hands of a partner or ex-partner than members of other racial groups."

As the Rice story unfolded, TV journalist and talk-show host Meredith Vieira told viewers about her own experience in an abusive relationship. "I know it's rampant in this country," Vieira said, "and we all have to accept the fact that it's not just an issue with the NFL—it's an issue with all of our lives, and until we take it seriously, more and more women are going to get abused."

Asking the Wrong Question?

One question that commonly arises in discussions of domestic violence is, "Why doesn't she just leave?" It has been asked about Janay Rice—even during last month's Miss America pageant, when host Kathy Ireland asked contestant Victoria Cowen (Miss Florida), "As a woman, what do you think of her decision?"

Social media is giving victims a chance to answer that question and be heard. Shortly after the second Rice video gained attention, author Beverly Gooden, who herself survived over a year of physical abuse from her former husband, started posting to Twitter statements illustrating the complexity of domestic violence—for example, "I stayed because I was halfway across the country, isolated from my friends and family. And there was no one to help me." The hashtag Gooden used, #WhyIStayed, quickly went viral, attracting tens of thousands of responses. A companion hashtag, #WhyILeft, also trended rapidly as victims told their stories of escape.

These social media streams are providing much-needed understanding to and support for victims of domestic violence. But another question demands attention. After #WhyIStayed started trending, counselor Noa Ashkenazi told *The Globe and Mail*, "In the past 24 hours, I have been asked 100 times, 'Why do women stay?' None of you ask, 'Why do men hit? Why do men abuse the women they love?'"

No single answer addresses all situations. Many frequently offered ones are wrong. For instance, alcohol does not cause domestic violence, though excessive drinking may increase the risk it will occur. Nor does a perpetrator's supposed inability to control anger cause the problem; abusers don't lash out at people in general, but only at certain people under certain conditions.

So why *do* men hit? "It's an ideological problem," states Dr. Jackson Katz, leading antisexism educator and activist. "It's an attitude about entitlement, about power, about who has the right to control the system. . . . [It's] a choice about your emotions, and not a big mysterious thing . . . beyond our understanding."

Culture of Violence?

Ray Rice isn't the only NFL player making headlines unrelated to his athletic performance. Adrian Peterson (Minnesota Vikings), Greg Hardy (Carolina Panthers), and Jonathan Dwyer (Arizona Cardinals) were all benched in September due to allegations or convictions of domestic violence.

At the statistical analysis website FiveThirtyEight, Benjamin Morris notes that while NFL players' arrest rate is only 13 percent of the national average, 55.4 percent of those arrests are related to domestic violence—"more than four times worse than the league's arrest rate for all offenses (13 percent), and domestic violence accounts for 48 percent of arrests for violent crimes among NFL players, compared to our estimated 21 percent nationally."

"It is not clear if on-field violent behavior leads to off-field violence," writes Dr. Ron Woods, performance coach and exercise science professor. "Common sense suggests that people who become accustomed to using physical intimidation and violence in sport naturally revert to those behaviors when facing conflict outside of sport."

Some neurobiological research suggests the concussions many football players sustain may damage the prefrontal cortex. "We all get aggressive at times," says University of Pennsylvania psychologist Adrian Raine. "What stops us from lashing out? It's a well-functioning prefrontal cortex. In spouse abusers, that guardian angel of behavior—that prefrontal cortex—is just not working as well."

People choose to commit domestic violence, meaning they can sometimes learn to make different choices. Treatment groups can hold men who abuse accountable for their behavior, teaching them to recognize and take responsibility for their actions, and helping them find new, nonviolent ways to respond to their emotions and interact with their partners.

Domestic Violence and the Church

The NFL's reaction to domestic violence has drawn some sharp criticism. Even as Goodell announced that the league "will get our house in order" when handling the issue going forward, many observers remained skeptical. Nita Chaudhary, cofounder of the women's advocacy group UltraViolet, claims Goodell "is responding to public outcry. He's already proven that if the public spotlight isn't on him . . . , he's more than willing to sweep domestic violence under the rug."

At times the church, too, has failed to address domestic violence in honest, healing ways. Whether by interpreting difficult biblical texts in ways that undercut rather than support victims (see "Core Bible Passages") or by staying silent on the subject altogether, we have been complicit in domestic violence. "I think many pastors still don't think it exists in their congregation," says Yvonne DeVaughn, director of Advocacy for Victims of Abuse.

At other times, however, the church does rise to the challenge of speaking and embodying God's good news of freedom and new beginnings in situations of domestic violence. Some examples:

- Black Mountain (North Carolina) Presbyterian Church trained its staff and volunteer leaders in responding to victims of domestic violence; educated its whole membership, young and old, on the issue with age-appropriate curricula; and committed to "regularly lifting up the issue in worship and once a year in sermons."

- The Indianapolis faith-based organization Not to Believers Like Us, Inc., sponsored a conference in October 2013 at St. Luke's United Methodist Church to raise awareness of domestic violence among faith communities. The conference urged every congregation to develop a "safety team" and "safety plan" for victims of domestic abuse.

- To address a shortage of space in local shelters, King of Kings Lutheran Church (Milwaukie, Oregon) worked with other congregations and community groups to create a housing project for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

- United Methodist Men is collaborating with United Methodist Women to increase efforts to end domestic violence. "Domestic violence occurs in lots of homes," says Gilbert Hanke, top staff executive, "including parsonages." He believes being a real man means not tolerating attitudes that assume women occupy a lower status.

When we as Christians take such concrete actions to educate people, within and beyond the congregation, about domestic violence and to advocate for those affected by it, we follow Jesus, who came to free captives and proclaim good news to the oppressed (**Luke 4:18**) "so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest" (**John 10:10**).

Getting and Giving Help

If your intimate partner is abusing you, know that you are not to blame. The abuser's behavior is not your fault. Domestic violence and sexual assault can happen to anyone. You did nothing to deserve the abuse. You can do things to stop it.

In a life-threatening emergency, call 9-1-1. If you can't get to a phone, go to a safe, public place where others can see you. At other times, find out the phone numbers of domestic violence hotlines in your area. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at www.thehotline.org. If you think your computer usage is monitored, call the hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224.

The hotline suggests these further steps, among others, you can take:

- Keep any evidence of physical abuse, such as pictures of injuries.
- Keep a detailed journal of all violent incidences. Keep your journal in a safe place.
- Know where you can go to get help.
- Plan with your children and identify a safe place for them, like a room with a lock or a friend's house where they can go for help.
- Acquire job skills or take courses at a community college as you can.
- Try to set money aside or ask friends or family members to hold money for you.

If you know a domestic violence victim, do not judge her or him. Educate yourself about resources in your area and share that information with the victim. Tell the person concrete ways you will offer help and support.

United Methodist Perspective

The Social Principles affirm that women and men have “equal worth in the eyes of God” (§161.E). As such, “family violence and abuse in all its forms—verbal, psychological, physical, sexual—is detrimental to the covenant of the human community” (§161.G).

The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2012 confronts the ways Christian Scripture and tradition have, when misused, “contributed to violence against women and children, and to the guilt, self-blame, and suffering which victims experience, and to the rationalizations used by those who abuse.” It acknowledges that, “tragically, no church or community is exempt” from incidents of domestic violence, and it calls upon people of faith to “take the lead in calling for a just response.”

Affirming “the sacredness of all persons and their right to safety, nurture and care,” the church “names domestic violence and sexual abuse as sins and pledges to work for their eradication” by listening to victims’ stories and by demonstrating “that the church is a place where people can feel confident in turning to first, not last, for comfort and healing” (§3423, “Violence Against Women and Children”).

Consistent with the Methodist conviction that every individual matters to God, the Social Principles expressly state, “While we deplore the actions of the abuser, we affirm that person to be in need of God’s redeeming love” (§161.G).

Helpful Links

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.thehotline.org
- Fact sheet from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: <http://www.ncadv.org/files/Domestic%20Violence%20Stylized--GS%20edits.pdf>
- “Violence Against Women and Children,” from *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/violence-against-women-and-children>

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Domestic Violence and Faith

How does Christian faith lead us to minister with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Almighty God, friend of the powerless and defender of the oppressed, now teach us as we study and reflect on the violence that threatens the lives of wholeness and peace for which you created us, as individuals and as families. May your Spirit lead us to hear difficult truth, to speak with compassion, and to commit ourselves to making peace. We pray in the name of the one who is our peace, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Survey Participants’ Awareness

Instruct participants to respond “agree,” “disagree,” or “no answer” to each of the following statements. They may also indicate degrees of agreement or disagreement. (Optional: Choose three locations in your meeting space to represent each option. Have participants respond by moving to the appropriate spot.)

- I have paid close attention to recent cases of domestic violence involving NFL players.
- I think society’s awareness of domestic violence has increased over the past several decades.
- I feel I understand what causes domestic violence.
- I know someone affected by domestic violence.

Allow time for any participants who may wish to talk about their responses to do so.

EXPLORE the Topic

Discuss the Rice Videos

Read or review “Staring Into the Dark Hole.” Invite participants to remember and discuss their initial reactions to the two videos of Ray and Janay Rice. Ask: Why do you think that, as Mike Florio points out, the videos provoked reactions from the NFL that reports of the incident alone did not? Why did the second video provoke a bigger reaction than the first?

Consider “The Scope of Domestic Violence”

Read or review this section of the essay. Ask: What information from this section, if any, surprises you most? Why? Do you share Meredith Vieira’s judgment that domestic violence is “rampant” in America today? Why or why not? (This section of the session may prove an appropriate time for participants to talk about people they have known who have been affected by domestic violence.)

Write Tweets About Domestic Violence

Read or review the first two paragraphs of “Asking the Wrong Question?” Recruit one or more participants to use smartphones or computers to search for and read aloud examples of #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft tweets for the group. Encourage participants to write new tweets, drawing from their knowledge and/or experience of the topic, for one or both of these hashtags. (Remind participants that tweets use no more than

140 characters, including spaces.) If time permits, post participants' tweets online. Ask: How else can social media be used to assist victims of domestic violence?

Consider Why Abusers Hit

Read or review the remainder of "Asking the Wrong Question?" Ask: How does Noa Ashkenazi's reframing of the question people are asking shift responsibility for domestic violence? What do you think of Jackson Katz's claim that domestic violence is ultimately about power?

Reflect on Difficult Scripture

Recruit three volunteers to read aloud these sections of Ezekiel 16: 8-14; 15-22; and 36-43. Ask: According to this chapter, how is God's relationship to Israel like a marriage? (God made a solemn covenant with Israel—verse 8.) How did Israel break God's covenant? (worship of idols, child sacrifice—verses 17-22) Why does this text compare Israel's behavior to prostitution? (The metaphor depicts spiritual infidelity as sexual infidelity, the violation of an intimate relationship of trust.) How do you react to God's announced punishment of Israel? How could this text about a symbolic woman, Israel, affect some readers' thinking about real women? (God's violence against Israel could be misread as justifying violence against real women.) How, if at all, can Christians today read this text as God's Word?

Interpret Ephesians 5:21-33

Recruit one or more volunteers to read aloud Ephesians 5:21-33. Ask: How has this text been used to justify domestic violence? What parts of the text itself challenge that interpretation? How do other Scriptures, such as Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28, affirm men and women's equality before God? How do such texts help you understand Ephesians 5:21-33? How would you paraphrase this text's main points in ways modern women and men would understand?

Discuss Positive Christian Responses

Read or review "Domestic Violence and the Church." Ask: What are congregations you know—our own and/or others—doing to serve victims of domestic violence? Use a computer or smartphone to discover what domestic violence-related ministries your denomination sponsors and supports. Ask: What more might our congregation do to minister with those affected by domestic violence?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

God of compassion, heal all who are wounded by domestic violence—those who are hurt and those who hurt them—that we may live together, women and men, in the blessed peace of Christ. Amen.

Close by reading or singing together "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2193).

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite a representative from a local abuse shelter or victims' services organization to talk with your group about the scope of domestic violence in your community, the services the organization provides, and what your group or congregation might do to help.
- Lead your group in starting to plan a Christmas gift collection for women and children in a local domestic violence shelter, as a small but tangible expression of care and concern.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Advocacy, Politics, and Faith

Engaging with social issues often involves a political dimension. How are congregations and faith leaders taking part in political advocacy? How does Christian faith guide us as we discern how to advocate?