



on abuse

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Puppets speak louder than words.

When I visited old friends in my German home town Erlangen, they showed me their puppet collection, carefully arranged in the play room allocated for their grandchildren. I took the shot without giving it much thought. I just wanted to capture the variety of handcrafted puppets. It brought back wonderful memories of professional puppet shows at birthday parties and other special celebrations.

When I read about puppets shows as a tool for creating awareness about abuse among children, I went back to the picture and now realized how powerfully it spoke to the very topic of child abuse we were going to address in our Sunday morning service, marking the beginning of 16 days of activism for no violence against children and women.

There is a child lying on her back on the floor. Her arms raised, as if grasping for help. Beside her, but

turned away, a crocodile, a dangerous predator, leaving the scene. Everyone else seems to be looking away, to the side, or upwards, pretending not to see. It is a most unsettling scene. Who are those looking away, being absent and silent? I recognize a police officer, a grandmother, the Kasperle, a bandit and the witch. The only one who looks us directly into the eye is the figure of the devil. There is a frightening absence of empathy and support. And the devil's fixating gaze seems to ask the onlooker: "What are you going to do about it?"

It was in the context of this campaign of no violence against children and women that this arrangement of puppets became an eerie installation. In a similar way, a bible passage, the Gospel of Matthew 18, that I had worked with before, suddenly began to speak directly to this topic. I was very familiar with some of the individual verses and parables that made up that chapter. But up until

now I had never read the whole chapter as one movement and argument. Biblical scholars refer to it as a compilation of ecclesiastical instructions. But it is much more specific than that. For from the beginning it expresses a deep concern for the "little ones" in the congregation. And what if what follows is all related to the protection and safety of those who basically had no rights?

The argument begins with Jesus' invitation to become like children, in order to enter the kingdom of God. To be childlike in this context signifies the ability to look at the world from below, from the lowly position of the most vulnerable and powerless. What follows is an explosion of anger and outrage: "If anyone causes one of these little one ... to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Not unlike some of the infamous psalms of retribution, Jesus expresses raw emotions of hatred and revenge. And the warning made to those tempted to commit such a crime, is just as drastic and crude: "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away." We are then told the story of the lost sheep. In contrast to Luke's version of the parable, this lost sheep does not represent a sinner, but rather one of those little ones, in need of being found and being brought back to safety. The loss and pain victims of violence and abuse experience is often aggravated by a culture of silencing. In addition, victims themselves feel a sense of shame and guilt, and often experience a second victimization, being accused of some form of complicity.

But the argument of Matthew 18 does not stop there. Having called the congregation into responsibility, to re-consider the status of children, to grieve their suffering, to seek and find the lost, the author now addresses the challenge of confronting the perpetrator: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault ..." The process outlined should not be seen as replacing the legal process. The law has to take its course. At the same time, a faith community has a particular responsibility to hold the perpetrator accountable without shaming him or her any further in public. Only if there is no insight into the crime committed and the suffering inflicted should the perpetrator be exposed to the whole congregation and possibly even be no longer considered a brother or sister in Christ. The goal of the process though is not expulsion, but restoration. And

therefore the passage ends with the parable of the unmerciful servant. It raises the difficult question of how many times one would need to forgive someone. It is important to emphasize that the author does not burden the victim with the need to offer forgiveness, but rather imagines the congregation, vicariously, engage in this process of reconciliation and not withhold from others what they themselves have received in abundance. This is a tall task.

I am returning to the opening puppet scene. Some statistics tell us that before turning 17, one in three South African children are likely to suffer some form of sexual abuse. We also know that in most cases the perpetrator is known to the victim and a person they thought they can trust. This makes it so difficult to protect "the little ones", but also to find them. For some of them are too young to understand what is happening to them and do not know what is appropriate and what is not.

Fortunately there is a growing awareness around those issues and some individuals have committed themselves to both protect and find. Lawrence Mongalo is one of them. He was a former telephone counsellor for Childline. But when he realized that education was an essential part of supporting the children, he started his Ubuntu Puppets. Since 2014 he is travelling to rural schools around South Africa. A combination of storytelling, songs, and puppeteering empowers the children to understand and report abuse.

In a similar vein, Maya Nadison, from the States, combined her love

for the arts and her dedication to mental health. She uses her handmade puppets to help children talk about abuse. Working with 15 carefully crafted insects, she tells stories which allow the children to draw moral conclusions from the insect world. The way fireflies light up to communicate an interest in mating becomes a lesson about consensual sex. And the hissing sound of a madagascar hissing cockroach, which doesn't have wings to fly away, reminds the children that when trapped they can still try to make themselves heard. The advantage of working with puppets and sharing stories from the animal world is, that the children can to a certain degree remove themselves from their own experience when talking about sexual abuse.

Two powerful examples for not looking away, but finding creative ways to rise to the challenge of protecting and finding those who are lost. In an attempt to give liturgical and symbolic expression to our own role as a faith community, we invited the children to walk a small labyrinth laid out with ropes in our sanctuary. As the children moved into the centre and out again, we committed ourselves to their journey with singing a Celtic song of blessing and protection. Circling inwards we seek protection, care, and presence. Circling outwards we learn trust, independence, and freedom. The 16 days coincide with the beginning of the season of Advent. We prepare ourselves to welcome the infant Jesus and are reminded that to welcome any of those little ones is to welcome him.