

Sample Sermon

There is a time for everything . . . a time to be quiet and a time to speak up.

— Ecclesiastes 3:1-7

Today marks the beginning of National Crime Victims' Rights Week, with the theme, *Victims' Voices: Silent No More*. Who among us is not aware of the impact crime has had all around us? Every day we can open up the newspaper or listen to the TV relate countless atrocities that have been perpetrated upon innocent victims . . . children in daycare centers or their own homes abused by adults to whose care they have been entrusted; innocent bystanders injured from the violence of an escalated argument; parents of young children and children themselves killed by intoxicated drivers; elderly people who have lost their life savings to smooth telephone operators who promised them greater financial security; embattled victims of international genocide and torture . . . Crime is all around us, in our homes, in our communities, in our society. Although we regularly hear reports that the crime rate is falling, this decline means nothing to the two-year-old child left at home to fend for himself, or the young man who was savagely beaten and has been left permanently disabled, or the elderly woman who has been burglarized in her own home and can never feel truly safe again.

How do we, as people of God, respond to the injustices in our society that are being perpetrated on a daily basis upon innocent victims? What is our responsibility in all of this? How do we "speak up" for victims of crime? There are many answers to these questions, and none of them is easy. The theme, *Victims' Voices: Silent No More*, poignantly reflects the need for victims of crime and their supporters to speak up for victims. To those who say we also have a responsibility to minister to offenders and help them stand accountable and return to God, I say yes, we do. And as we help offenders understand and repair the wrongs they have done, we serve victims as well. But today, let us turn our attention specifically to the victims. Because for far too long, too many victims have been quiet. And for far too long, too many people in our society have not listened to victims.

Some of you may be wondering why it would be necessary to encourage or support victims in their right to be heard within our society and within our legal system. If you have not directly experienced crime and its aftermath, including involvement with the criminal justice system, you may not be aware of how unfair and even *unjust* such a process can be to victims. Although our legal system has long protected the rights of the accused, it has taken many years and arduous efforts by victims and victim advocates to even *begin* to afford similar legal protection to victims.

The cornerstone of our criminal justice system is the principle that one is “innocent until proven guilty.” It is right and good that we guarantee such protection to those who stand accused of crimes in our society. What is not right or good is the fact that often, too often, the victims of these crimes are afforded no protection, no right to be heard, no right to be present at legal proceedings, and no right to be notified when a perpetrator has been released from prison. It is true that virtually every state guarantees victims basic rights within the legal system, such as the right to be heard and the right to be notified of legal proceedings involving the accused. Unfortunately, the fact that victims *have* certain rights does not mean that they are always guaranteed the right to *exercise* them.

How do we support victims in finding their voices? We cannot all go, nor are we all called, to speak out on behalf of victims and victims’ rights. But we can educate ourselves about these rights. We can support and encourage those we know and love to exercise their rights if they have been victimized. We can offer compassionate understanding and love to members of our neighborhoods and our communities who have been victimized. And some of us, who *are* called, can speak out as advocates for those who may be too young, too frightened, or simply too beaten down to speak -- the poor, the uneducated, the children, the disenfranchised, the elderly, the brokenhearted among us.

In Isaiah 1:17, we are exhorted to “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the case of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” The word of God is filled with His insistence that we seek the cause of justice. God’s plan for each of us is different, and it is our task to seek it out on a daily basis. For many of us, it seems all we can do to get food on the table and clothes on our children’s backs, much less worry about those among us who have been victimized by crime. We must also remember, however, that although we are called in different ways, we are *all* called to lives of compassion and love. It is so very important that we begin to understand that compassion and love need to be extended to victims of crime in ways that assist them in their struggles to be heard and achieve justice.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6) At some level, we all hunger and thirst for righteousness. This week, let us allow our awareness to focus on those among us who hunger and thirst for the *righteousness of justice*. Let us listen to the word of God as it speaks to us about the rights of innocent victims of crime and our responsibility -- as individuals, as a community and as a country -- to speak up and to assist others who may not be able to speak for themselves. Let us listen to the word of God, and in so doing, we will learn how to listen to the voices of victims. And in whatever way we can, large or small, let us help lift up those voices -- in the name of love, in the name of compassion, in the name of true justice.