

Feeling threatened

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Today we have a post from an anonymous guest, who writes about feeling threatened at the church she serves:

Away from my church congregation I do street work. You know, the usual. Working with women who have been victims of violence, with folks who are trading and using drugs, and with individuals with limited safety nets. They are my friends and my second congregation, too.

In this second life, violence is a natural part of people's experience. From petty folks using words to bend the will of another, to others who use light violence to control. Sometimes it's only the threat of violence, but other times it can be a slap or a punch. Then there are the others who rape, beat, and kill to get what they want.

Most often, I'm dealing with the aftermath of those actions—fielding phone calls from scared women, helping individuals make a safety plan, filing police reports, and sometimes, holding the hands of survivors.

I know the language of abuse. I know what it means to have someone ignore your no. I know what it means to be afraid, if only from hearing about it from people I love.

Until it happens to me.

My street congregation and my church congregation overlapped recently. Someone who tries to control through words has been trying to contact me for years. While he acts as though he is interested in saving women from violence, the way he does this is through distorting the truth, triangulation, manipulation, and lastly, by exerting the power of place: showing up to my congregation.

You may ask, "But isn't everyone welcome in your church?" And while the general answer to this is yes, the specific answer is no. This man came into my congregation, did not identify himself as the person who had written me manipulative and even angry emails, and insisted that we get together to discuss his issues.

The implicit threat in all of this? I know where you live. It's as if he said to me, "You can ignore my emails (which I had done, never responding to any of them, over 3 years), but you can't ignore that I know where you are."

It reminds me of Alanis Morissette's song, Versions of Violence. She lists some types of violence, including "Explaining and controlling/Judging, opining and meddling," and the chorus says:

These versions of violence

Sometimes subtle, sometimes clear

And the ones that go unnoticed

Still leave their mark once disappeared

I am not, ultimately, afraid that this person will commit physical violence. I try to imagine him coming to my church with a gun, or following me secretly. I just can't see that he could do that. And not only that,

I believe that I could defend myself against him. But I can imagine him telling my congregation that I've been unkind to him, that I don't really care about violence about women, that I'm not a good pastor. The good news is that my congregation wouldn't believe him.

Part of what makes me afraid is his talent at using my own thoughts against me. He is exploiting my own fears about my competency. He is capitalizing on my own fears of not being nice enough, not being Christian enough, not being a good enough pastor to take care of everyone. And it is this violence, this breeding guilt, shame, and fear, that makes me angry.

But ultimately, what makes me most angry and afraid is his repeated refusal to acknowledge and accept my "No." I want to yell, at the top of my lungs, "NO MEANS NO!" I am willing to accept responsibility for my actions, for my "No," whether it makes him angry or not, but the unwillingness to accept it leaves me feeling vulnerable and wondering what will happen next.

In the best of all worlds, I see that I have three ways to respond. First, I had to tell my congregation about him, to flatten the triangle before it is even created. He will not be able to create a wedge between my congregation and I. And I've had to allow my congregation to support me and even protect me from this violence.

Second, to overcome my own fear, I've had to practice trusting my instinct. My instinct says this man is a bad man. Which means that he is not a safe person for me, and gives me permission to place boundaries around my life and my safety. My instinct also says that I'm a good pastor, both to my traditional congregation and to my street congregation. His opinion and manipulation only has as much power in me as I give it.

And lastly, to follow Jesus' commandment to love your enemies. I recognize that this man is a hurting soul. Somewhere along the way, something good in him got twisted up, and perhaps someone did not accept his "No!" For him I pray: peace, justice, and forgiveness. And for myself, I pray that he will accept my "No."