

What is Safe?

This past weekend someone was raped in her college dorm room only a few doors from our daughter's room. It wasn't date rape, but middle of the night, stranger in the dark rape. It wasn't our daughter, but another young woman who is also just taking her first steps toward adulthood and now has learned that the world can be a brutally unsafe place.

Our first impulse was to rush to campus, get our daughter and bring her home. She must be safe, we must make sure she's safe. But what is safe? In these days of Matthew Shepard, James Byrd and Columbine, what/where is safe?

I think it's partly our middle class sense of entitlement to comfort and security, a fairly recent (post WWII?) phenomenon that magnifies our horror at the violence within and around us. Not in the Midwest, not in a small city, not in us. We long for the good old days when people knew how to act, when America was the way America was supposed to be.

I remember my grandmother's stories about evading highway robbers in their model-T as they also prayed none of the tires which regularly blew would give out when they needed all the speed they could muster to avoid being stopped by the thieves and their valuables taken. And all of this in rural Wisconsin, one of those Midwestern states where, supposedly, nothing ever happens – good or bad.

What is safe? Last week I spent several days at an urban ministry conference and had the privilege of participating in some of the training for Simba Camp – a summer camp for African-American male youth, run by African-American men. Many of the youth who go to this camp have never been safe as middle class folks define safety. Inner city life often doesn't provide an

environment in which trust can develop.

However, after some days of Iowa openness and getting to know each other, these young men and their elders who are living with and caring for them participate in a pain fire. Around a roaring fire and under cover of darkness, these young men who have known so much sorrow and rage and fear are encouraged, in this place where no one will be judged and no one will be rejected, to tell their stories. They tell of the horror that has hung over their young lives and they help each other let it go. Let the pain go into the stick they may be holding and throw it into the fire.

I thought about this experience as I thought about the rape on our daughter's dorm floor and I thought that maybe safe in these days of change and uncertainty in our nation isn't about having the best security system on our house or the finest locks and guard dogs. We sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", not a mighty fortress is our house or subdivision or country. Being safe is knowing that even when the violence is all around us and even in us that there is Someone who has hung on the tree of our pain and our horror and our rage and our fear so that we can be free in the depths of our beings, no matter what the circumstances, to live and love and care. Jesus took our judgment on himself. Jesus will never reject us, but rather offers himself as the balm that heals yesterday, today and for all eternity.

The church is called to be leaven in our society at all levels: the moral, social, educational, economic and political. We are called to make a difference in the world. But we must never forget that the hope we can offer is grounded in this One who sits with us by the fire of our pain, the pain we can share with no one else, and whispers in our ear, "You are safe with me forever."

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