

“God is Love” Prophetic Witness by Gwen Williams July 6, 2016.

I grew up as the youngest of six, with four brothers and one sister. In my family, boys were to be seen and not heard, girls were to be invisible and serve. I was neglected from the time I came into this world, and the abuse started shortly afterward. My father was alcoholic and was verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive to all of us. My mother took out her frustrations on me. At the age of six or seven, the first sexual abuse occurred at the hand of a neighbor. It was continued by my brother and my sister’s husband at age 14 and went on for years.

My family didn’t belong to any church, but I prayed to God every day to save me from the abuse and neglect. When nothing intervened, I was convinced that I wasn’t a good enough Christian for God to answer my prayers. When I had the opportunity to go to church as a teen, I dove in head-first at a UCC church in Rochester, and did everything imaginable to be the best Christian I could be. I was president of the youth group, sang in the choir, served on the Southern Association and State Youth Ministries Committees; I was a counselor at Pilgrim Point. I even had the pulpit one Sunday morning to preach peace. How ironic, when my insides were churned into a great mass of neediness, anger, confusion and despair. When the abuse continued, I realized I had to take action. So I told and told and told people about the abuse. I told my mom, my coach, my school counselor, my pastor *and* his wife and they all either dismissed me, gave me the “just say no” lecture, or didn’t believe me. I was totally abandoned by everyone who was supposed to care for me and by my God. To make matters more confusing and the sense of abandonment more devastating, the two worst incidents of sexual abuse occurred on a Christmas Eve and an Easter Sunday. It seemed God had stabbed me and was twisting the dagger.

When I turned eighteen I left home as quickly as I could and I thought my nightmares were behind me. I was wrong. They came with me. Depression and anxiety followed me for years and continue to this day. The memories are blurrier, but sometimes they come back clearly with a fury. Every Christmas and Easter I am reminded of the abuse. The feeling of being alone remains, and I struggle with the re-victimization by the criminal justice process that has been, and continues to be, overwhelming.

After a few years of therapy, I started to scrutinize my image of God. A benevolent parental figure didn’t fit with my experience. I had to throw everything out the window and come up with what fits for me. I remembered I had been taught that we experience God when we interact with love with one another. Is God simply that spark we feel when someone touches our heart?

I actually found that to be a freeing image. I realized that spark within me had gotten me through more than a few suicidal nights to see the morning. That spark is love. God is the essential love at our core and when we share it, it grows. As I processed, I realized God was relying on *people* to be there for me as a child. *People* let me down, not God. And, I realized that meant I also had a responsibility to be present for others. God is in everyone. *Everyone*: rich or poor, young or old, ill or well, LGBTQ or straight, neuro-typical or autistic, Christian or atheist, stranger or friend, nurturing or abusive. Everyone has a need to have that spark replenished. That is what community is all about. We need to keep welcoming people, their stories, and their offerings if we are to grow as individuals and as a church. And, we need to reach out to one another to support and heal each other with God’s love.