

Last February, as part of Service to Serve, we saw two videos
One, a woman, who reported that 20% of college women had been victims of sexual assault.
I questioned and challenged that number. Number of feminists have characterized various activities as sexual assault--leering, catcalls. So I looked it up.
And yes, 20% of women in college have been victims of assaults that would be considered a crime--the crime of sexual assault, whatever it's called in your state statutes. This is a broader category than rape. This includes groping and fondling, and also includes verbal threats that are intended and taken to be serious.
Twenty percent, One in five. Jesus! That's messed up.

Another video was of a guy, talking about words and phrases.

Simple declaratory sentence:

"John beat Mary."

"John battered Mary."

"Mary was battered."

"Mary is a battered woman."

You've changed a verb--beat or battered--to an adjective.

Now you're describing Mary in terms of a condition--battered woman.

This is Mary's problem. This is a woman's problem.

The question is, Where did John go? John's not in the sentence. John's not in the room.

This is not a problem with Mary--she's a battered woman--this is a problem with John. He battered Mary. He beat a woman. A human being.

And here: Twenty percent of college women have been the victims of sexual assault.

No: College men have sexually assaulted one in every five college women.

It's not that one in five college men commit sexual violence; I'm sure there are a small number of repeat offenders. Statistics suggest that it's just about 5-7 percent. But there are men, boys, in college roaming around and sexually assaulting the girls, women, they know in school.

What's going on? Is this new? Is it just an increase in reported incidents?

This is against the backdrop of a general decrease in rape over the past 30-40 years. Statistics from the 70s and 80s are spotty and hard to interpret, but most people dealing with crime and justice agree that the total number of rapes per capita is significantly less than 30 or 40 years ago. Yet the number of sexual assaults on campus seems to be at an all-time high.

I can state, from my own limited experience, that when I was in college in the 1970s, the incidence of sexual assault, in my urban small university, was vanishingly low. I understand that most women don't report rape, let alone other sexual assault, but I never heard from any girl, or woman, or any college boy, or man, about any incident of sexual assault. And the statistics do seem to bear out this intuition.

Now, let me speak frankly. I know that in the early dating years, the years of college or early employment, it's up to the boy to move things along. Sex isn't going to happen--typically--if the man doesn't initiate things. These are generalizations, and certainly not universal, but it's generally the boy who makes the first move, starts to undo clothing, and I suppose that the initial sexual contact, without an explicit invitation, could be considered sexual assault. It doesn't

happen that the boy says, "I'm going to unbutton your blouse now." I was certainly in the position, in my youth, of trying to calibrate precisely just how far and how fast I could go without blowing the whole project. But: I always understood that No meant No. There was a lot of drinking when I was in college, and drink helped the process along; but I would never--none of my friends would ever--have thought about drugging a woman, or forcing sex on a girl who was passed out.

What's going on? Why are young men in college thinking they are empowered to force themselves on young women? And what can we do about it?

Part of it could be the general coarsening of society. It's pretty apparent that the widespread use of electronic communication, including social media, blogs, and comments on websites, has allowed the meanest, worst, and most disturbing habits and practices to flourish. I know every generation has said that this new generation has no class and no taste--Plato had the same complaint in ancient Greece--but I think most people would agree that the level of personal attack, the lack of respect for others, the coarseness of language, is something we haven't seen for generations. It's become easier and more common to demonize, objectify, and degrade all of those around us.

Another big cause, in my opinion, is porn--pornography. I'm not reflexively against porn.

People like looking at people they're sexually attracted to. Same sex, the other sex.

Some of the earliest images created by people are images of naked bodies.

Museums are filled with images of naked people--not just "figure studies" but for erotic purposes. But porn has changed.

When I was becoming aware of sex, in the 1960s, if you wanted to get porn, there was some guy who would raid his father's or uncle's collection of Playboy.

In those days, courts were struggling with what was "obscene" and could be prohibited to be shown, until they just gave up and said the hell with it, watch whatever you want.

To get porn you had to go to sleazy places--sleazy movie theaters or sleazy bookstores.

The invention of the video cassette recorder meant that you could watch porn at home--and I remember when all of the adult movie theaters closed within a few months of each other.

But you still had to go to a sleazy bookstore, or if you went to the corner video store, they had a special section, behind a door or behind a curtain, and you took the chance of running into someone you knew--a teacher; a minister; your kid's teacher--when walking into the special section.

Now you can get all the porn you want, any time you want, in the dark privacy of your own home.

And back then, if you wanted to consume a lot of porn, you had to spend a lot of money.

Now it's all free--as much as you want.

And back then, because all porn cost money, the sellers wanted to produce porn that would appeal to the largest possible audience--because that's how you make money. Porn cost money to produce, so it had to bring in a large return to make a profit. They produced works that would appeal to a broad range of tastes. The most bizarre, gross, disgusting stuff had a very limited audience, so not much was produced. The chance that the average normal-ish porn consumer would come across something beyond the pale was pretty slim.

Now it's all free. Porn is essentially free to produce, so it doesn't matter to the producers how many people view it--there is some sense of you want to get the most number of clicks, because that's how you make money, but the need to make back the initial investment isn't there.

So there are a lot more niches out there. There's much more disgusting and degrading porn than there every used to be.

And it's much more likely that the casual consumer of porn will see more degrading, hostile images than before.

And the amount of porn that's actively degrading to women is more common.

There are a lot more images, and video, of women being forced, or coerced, to engage in sexual behavior. And young men, the most avid consumers of porn, are bombarded by those images on a regular basis.

I really do think this has a lot to do with sexual assault statistics. If you see something over and over again, if you hear something over and over again, you start to conclude that it's normal. It's OK. I think there are a lot of young men who, if you sat them down and made them think hard about it, would ultimately conclude that, no, those women in that video don't really enjoy being dominated; no, it's not a good idea to force or compel or coerce sex with women. But with all the images normalizing this behavior, and young men consuming it in times and under conditions that are not rational or logical, just as with any other propaganda it becomes easy to fall into the wrong conclusions.

What can we do about this? This is a message for the men. I don't mean to ignore the women, but you've heard messages for years about how to avoid sexual assault. Remember: It was John who beat Mary. This is a message for John. And Dave. And Geoff. And the men who know them.

First: Tell your sons, your nephews, your grandsons, this is not right. This is not normal. All this video is fiction. It's no more real than a video game. These women are not real, and they are not enjoying this. It's a movie. It's fiction.

Here: My son grew up playing video games. We went through, I don't know how many computers and game systems in order to keep up with the improving game technology. Many of the games were violent shoot-em-ups and I played along with him. It was always clear to him, and if it wasn't I made sure he knew it, that these games were made up, and that real life didn't work that way. My son is the least violent person you could hope to meet. He always had a firm grasp of reality and fiction. Kids can understand that. Young men can understand that. It may take repeating the message, but they get it. If they hear it. If they don't hear it, they won't know it. Tell the young men in your life that this is not real, it's not normal, it's not right. It's made up. If you do this in real life, you're bad, you're evil, you're disrespectful, you're, um, a criminal. Don't do it.

Next: And this is harder. Tell the grown-up men in your life to knock it off. We all have friends who send around those funny snippets--too rude for Facebook or other social media--but sent by email to a chosen group of people. It's funny. Look at the pair on her. Watch when she bends over. Remember; I'm just fine with porn. I'm just fine with pictures and jokes. But when your friend sends out that email with the woman getting beaten, or dominated, or having just been forced to, whatever, it's not funny. It adds to the atmosphere that men all around us, and our young men, pick up on; it's OK to dominate, to intimidate, to assault women. It's a video. It's funny. It's not.

You know what will happen. Your friends will call you a pussy. "Uh, Dave, you gotta get your wife away from your computer. She told me I was an asshole." This is what takes real courage. You have to stand in there, and practice the words in advance if you need to, but stand in there and say, "Hey, I like a joke as much as the next guy, but would you want your sister, your daughter, your niece, your granddaughter to date some guy who thought this was OK?"

And next: Vote. The congressional elections are only four months away. I don't need to tell you how bad the situation in this country has gotten. The current occupant of the White House is a...monster. Nazis are fine people. Immigrants are rapists. Immigrants are animals. Separate children from their parents. Mock a disabled reporter. Tell people at rallies to beat up protesters. Grab 'em by the pussy. I'm serious when I say that this man, and the people in power who support him, are actively encouraging violence, including sexual violence, in this country, today and every day.

There is a limit to what political messages we can give in the pulpit. A priest or a minister, or a member of the congregation, can say vote your values, can support particular legislation or governmental reforms, but we can't tell people what party to vote for or what candidate to vote for. So I won't do that. Let me just quote a couple of prominent Republicans.

Steven Schmidt, a Republican consultant who worked in the Bush administration: The first step to a season of renewal in our land is the absolute and utter repudiation of Trump and his vile enablers in the 2018 election by electing Democratic majorities.

George Will, prominent conservative commentator: The congressional Republican caucuses must be substantially reduced. So substantially that their remnants, reduced to minorities, will be stripped of the Constitution's Article I powers that they have been too invertebrate to use against the current wielder of the Article II powers.

We keep hearing that we need to reach out to those who disagree with us politically, and show them love and understanding. And I do understand that a lot of people were so fed up with the way the government was being handled that they voted, in 2016, for someone who would break things and shake things up. But by now, if they haven't realized that they were lied to, conned, cheated, and duped, I'm sorry, I don't have enough love for them. And I'll say it again: The people in power who support this man, they weren't duped, they know exactly what they are doing. We need to crush them. We need to bury them. Vote, and if you can, work for candidates in other districts and other states. Send money to help get the message out.

I've talked about the project I do in the forest preserves a number of times. We often get school groups--20 or 30 kids at a time--and we get a lot of work done, improving natural habitat. At the end of the day I always try to give a message about continuing to work for the environment, getting other people involved, bringing their families out to see what we've done. A couple of times this spring, I made my message about voting. You want to protect the environment, do everything you can, but make sure you vote. The kids roll their eyes. They've heard this before, probably plenty of times. But we have to find a way to tell young people that these are not normal times, that their vote makes a difference, that all the marches and rallies, all the signs, all the tweets, all the video, isn't worth a damn if they don't vote. We have to change the atmosphere in this country that sets people against each other, that dehumanizes people, that celebrates violence. We have to get these enablers out of office.

So that's my message. Talk to young men; talk to grown-up men; go out and vote, and bring someone with. I know; it's another thing on the list of actions that it's so important to take. But if I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain.