

A Sermon For All The Little People

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented October 30th, 2016,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Luke 19: 1-10

When our churches heard about malaria – a preventable killer – we acted, sending medicines and educating people to help them survive. When our churches heard about those who live in real hunger – another preventable killer – we acted, sending animals, food, and education to help our brothers and sisters survive. Today we are going to talk about something very specific, an epidemic that has been striking our young people at an alarming rate. And it's not going to be an easy conversation. But it is one that is, I think, long overdue. And it is in that spirit that I bring before you another preventable killer today, one that has robbed us of far too many promising young lives already, and it is most simply described in the word: "bullying". And if we are wondering what a bully acts and looks like all we have to do is observe the antics of a man who could be the poster boy for bullying: Donald Trump, the candidate running for the Presidency of The United States. He's a bully, especially around women.

Now I can hear some of you thinking, "Well, that's down there and we are different here. Really? Bullying: What has that got to do with me?" More than you think. Bullying is part of everyone's life. Like me you probably grew up and were taught, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But I want to tell you today: it's not true. I've broken bones before. And I've been teased, mocked, bullied. And I can tell you firsthand, the wounds of a broken body heal far more quickly and more cleanly than the damage words can cause.

In Proverbs, Solomon writes, "The words of the wicked are a deadly ambush - like sword thrusts - death and life are in the power of the tongue. The words of the wise, however, "bring healing - and deliverance - a gentle tongue is a tree of life, and a truthful witness," says Solomon, "saves lives." Words matter. Words have weight, they can wound, they can divide, destroy, and even bring death. Let me tell you about a VANCOUVER high-school student, a 15-year-old girl who in late 2012 who committed suicide — a tragic ending. Amanda Todd explained how she and friends were playing on a camcorder and posting pictures online when she was in Grade 7. She was urged to "flash. So she did. 1 year later she got a message on Facebook from a male classmate. It said: "If you don't put on a show for me I will send the "flash pics to all your friends". He knew her address, school, relatives, friends, family name.

Amanda said later she received a knock on her door and it was the police telling her family that a photo of her had been circulated. The family moved but she couldn't go out of the house because her anxiety got worse. A year passed and the cyber-bully came back with a new list of her friends and her school. "I cried every night. Lost all my friends and respect people had for me," she said. A year later a school board official confirmed Todd had killed herself.

Let me tell you about Rehtaeh Parsons, who in the same year, became the victim of cyber-bullying. At the other extreme end of our country, in BRIDGEWATER, N.S., Bridgewater Police chief John Collyer announced the death of Nova Scotia teen Rehtaeh Parsons. The 17-year-old attempted suicide and was taken off life support after a digital photo of what her family says was a sexual assault was circulated among students at her school in Cole Harbour, N.S. "We've been trying to get the word out, but youth live in the moment and they sometimes forget that once (an image) is out there, electronically, it's out there forever," the police chief said. "It's a tough discussion, talking about "Bullying", but it's one that needs to be held."

Easy targets, both of them: neither deserved what they got. Each, a beloved child of God, a life lost because they didn't quite fit in. So before we absolve ourselves of responsibility, ask yourself: how

often have you complained about foreigners? Mocked a heavy accent? Moaned about having to press one for English? Or a woman whose clothes were a little too “butch” for your tastes? We create this culture of ridicule. We have helped create this problem.

And I’m going to push you a bit farther today. Bullying is an epidemic that disproportionately affects those who are “different”. For instance, I don’t care what you think about homosexuality. But I feel our United Church’s position on the subject of homosexuality is the right one. It would be a sad day when our churches cannot even offer a safe place to wrestle with these questions. And listen carefully: “We love all people, regardless of sexuality; and everyone is welcome to find a safe space here.”

During World War II, there were Christians in Germany who were willing to risk everything – their reputations, their homes, even their own lives – in order to give shelter to and save the lives of their Jewish neighbors. They didn’t force their neighbors to confess Christ first; they didn’t hinge safety on theological debates; no, they sheltered them because it was the right thing to do. My question for us today is: can’t we – who are faced with far less risk to ourselves – can’t we do at least as much?

Bullying (which is just another word for intimidation) is evil, because it strips another person of his or her worth and dignity, reducing them to a punchline, replacing a name with a label. Bullying is evil, because it preys on the easy targets, the weak and the powerless – exactly those people Jesus told us to seek out in his name. “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.” But it was Zacchaeus, the little man, that Jesus sought out.

It is time to speak up for those who do not have a voice. It is time to reclaim the power of healing words, to speak life, to speak hope – and to raise our children to do the same. It’s not enough to teach our kids how to cope with the teasing and bullying they receive; we need to challenge them to stand up for, to stand beside, others, to take the risk of befriending or defending the outcasts, the awkward, the lonely, the scrawny, the smelly, the foreigner and the stranger. We need to model it in our own lives. – we need to stop laughing at another’s expense, to stand together and say: this is not ok, and we are not going to be silent any more.

Our commission, as a church, is from God to do something. We have to act as though we truly believe that each and every person is of sacred worth. We have to be a church, a community, where each one is welcome, is treated as a person who is made in God’s image, loved so much that Christ gave his life so he or she might live. And we might have to be willing to be a little uncomfortable ourselves – but that is a small price to pay to save a life. It’s time to stand up and be and become the gospel – the true gospel, not the angry hate-filled gospel that makes the headlines - not the gospel of judgment and condemnation but the gospel that say, “God so loved the world…” and God still loves today.

We can make a difference. We can save a life. We can’t afford to do any less. Amen? Amen.