

NEITHER STICKS NO STONES: THE POWER OF WORDS

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"Ok, Mr. self-proclaimed Irreverent Reverend," you might be sitting there thinking, "in a sermon that seems to beg for a call to prudence, just what is it that the person most likely to distract the conversation with something silly, if not cutting, going to say about bullying and the power of words? What does one of our church's class clowns want to tell us about right speech?"

"This oughta to be good" you might say, elbowing your neighbor, "you might want to stay awake for this one."

And, in full disclosure, I do feel a little bit nervous, as I start this. Certainly not about being a bully, I am hardly that, but about me talking about right speech. Me preaching on being sensitive about what you say is probably not too much less hypocritical than the preacher who in the middle of an affair is asked to preach about infidelity.

What am I going to say?

Truth is, writing this intro before I really begin, I both know and don't know? Let's see. Not knowing exactly what to say, I know this—I can't, nor do I want to, stand here and say we should watch our every word like I was reading from a finishing school handbook. That would sound hypocritical, and besides, you know me. Maybe engaging this will make me feel that I really do have to be more careful, and paint myself into some confessional corner? I hope not. Truth is, deep down, I do not feel like I have a great deal I need to change about the way I behave, or more particularly, speak.

And although I have spent plenty of time prepping for this, I might be stumbling to step out of this intro, where I feel safe because what I want to say about bullying, and about the language we use, somewhat contrasts, in a way takes us in different directions.

Bullying, especially talking about the new technological kinds that cross our digital screens, is the easy part, and both thankfully and woefully a hot topic these days, so I will begin there.

You likely have heard about the famous basketball coach Bobby Knight, who although remarkably successful has been fired or suspended more than once for "... shoving players around, or throwing basketballs at them," or a different coach for "screaming homophobic slurs at his team." Good. They should be fired. That's ridiculous.

And, you are no doubt familiar with the too many young people who take their lives because of cyber bullying. And if you missed that, you likely are aware of a different one, or a different one who nearly did. It's hard to keep track of how fast these cyber bullying stories happen these days. Obviously, we have a new version of an old problem to cope with.

I think bullying is a hot topic because it is happening in this broader culture of ours torn in two directions. We are on one hand in retreat from a general propriety and politeness that would frankly shock our grandparents, and on the other, we are more and more aware of its deep impact.

We are at the same time killing the foundation of common courtesy and propriety society rested on, much of it of course sexist and racist in ways we are not, while at the same time we are understanding the deep sociological and psychological the impact of the hurt caused.

It is a weird time. The moment we finally have gotten a grip on how devastating the mistreatment of each other can be, we are losing our habits and expectations of decorum. However, to make things more complicated, our impolite retreat and raised awareness is happening at the same time new technology constantly offers new means of mistreating one other. As we speak, our kids are discovering new forms of

torturing each other faster than we can figure out how to down-load an App. We are living in those interesting times the Chinese curse warned us about.

I remember over the summer sitting with a friend watching an interviewer talking to a college age girl, woman if you prefer, who told the interviewing doctor about a hazing experience in her sorority. Watching it, half of me went, "Big deal, she drank too much and found herself in a hospital," and the other half of me said "How does any sorority not know that you can't do that stuff anymore. Idiots."

I want you to know, and I oddly feel oddly compelled to convince you, that I was ahead of the curve on the impact of bullying. I really do remember being a kid and knowing that adults don't get it.

And that is not because I was a kid who was terribly bullied. I saw the impact of bullying, and even more so the impact of our relationships with our peers from a pretty safe place. In general, I was a little too big, a little too mainstream a kid to be the frequent target of bullies, and I was a little too well behaved and sensitive to be a bully myself. Nonetheless, I saw it, and I felt it.

As a kid with divorced parents just a little ahead of the curve of divorce being a normal mainstream experience, people always behaved as if this was a primary concern of mine. It was not. My home life was stable enough and my relationship with both my parents good enough that thankfully most of my concerns involved where I stood in the pecking order of social life at school.

There was of course Larry Shepherd. Larry and I went to church together, and sadly rode the same school bus for a couple years. It was on the bus to ninth grade that he spit out the window a few seats up in front of me, and some of his spit inadvertently blew back into my face through an open window a few rows back. He didn't intend on spitting on me, but he didn't apologize either.

Being a generally polite kid, all I asked him simply to say he was sorry, and he called my bluff and wouldn't, having exposed me as a peaceful coward until that school year ended. My ninth grade morning and evening rides to school were more defined by his presence on the bus than I wish to admit.

I understand that many of us, bullied or bully, have stories far deeper than that. I get it.

My colleague The Rev. Debra Haffner tweeted that, "The person who bullied me in elementary school's birthday was on (her) [Facebook] timeline today. And, it is amazing how seeing her name STILL hurts."

Bullying creates those longtime wounds that continue to fester years later. Like every trauma, bullying leaves its mark. At its worst, it is not that different from a PTSD vet who instinctively jumps under a table every time a car backfires. At its mildest it is a sullen haunt of a fearful moment.

The funny thing is, I most likely don't need to tell you this. This is probably little more than validation to your own experiences. You know this. This is a message I don't have to preach because mostly you know this.

However, if you don't believe me, ask yourself which comes more quickly to mind, what you had for dinner 2 nights ago, who your third to best friend was in 4th grade, or a list of the names or images of the top two people who bullied you before you were 20.

I still believe there is still some value to the old statement, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Likewise, there is value in sharing with victims the truth that they can't hurt you unless you let them. As long as we do not get fooled that it is what we say and write that can and mostly really do hurt us

However, it has no value, in fact, negative impact if our engagement with bullying ends with a slap on the shoulder, and a toughen up kid. It only has value if we in authoritative positions deeply understand and behave along the lines of the very inverse. That "Sticks and stones can of course break my bones, but words can, mostly really do, do the hurting."

If you are one of those rare few that walk into this room having experienced bullying only a theoretical issue, here are some facts. According to the U.S. Department of Education study from a few years back, "Thirteen million children are bullied each year in the U.S. Thirteen million each year, and on any given day 3.5 million stay home from school because they feel unsafe."

According to a report in *The New York Times* in 2013 (Deborah Haffner's sermon), researchers found that victims of bullying in childhood were 4.3 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder than those with no history of bullying or being bullied. Women who experienced bullying were 26.7 times more likely to have developed agoraphobia. And, if you want to assume that this is due to a correlation between those who are being bullied often being the same people who face any other number of challenges, check this out. Even after the researchers accounted for pre-existing psychiatric problems or other factors that might have contributed to psychiatric disorders, like physical or sexual abuse, poverty and family instability, the effects of being bullied seemed to stand apart as impactful. Bullying is traumatic. Don't kid yourself.

I knew it was an undiagnosed crisis by the time I was eleven. And I was mostly one of the cool kids.

What bullies are unconsciously saying is in effect is that my desire to feel good about me requires or at least trumps the experience of the other. The trouble is, for all the trouble it causes, oddly enough bullying affects and effects bullies too. Not only do victims of bullying show markers long into adulthood of its legacy, bullies themselves show that they are at risk too.

In fact, bullies who were also usually also the victims of the kind of abuse they distribute were fourteen times more likely to develop a panic disorder as adults, than those who did not experience bullying. Fourteen times.

Moreover, bullies were/are 4.8 times more likely to experience depression than non-bullies, and men who were both bullies and victims were 18.5 times more likely to have had suicidal thoughts in adulthood, compared to the participants who had not been bullied or perpetrators.

However, even bullies who were not victims of bullying themselves were 4.1 times more likely to have antisocial personality disorder as adults than those never exposed to bullying in their youth.

Ok, enough stats, you know bullying is, always was, and sadly you also know bullying always will be a problem.

We are—always have been—always will be, in the business of separating ourselves socially from one another. To me bullying might just be best defined by when we see that process get excessive, and uncomfortable. We should of course always be careful of this act. Of physical violence no doubt, but also about using words that hurt, and isolate.

However, the conversation, and this sermon, take a turn for the more interesting and controversial right about here, when I dare to say that we should also be careful not to be too fastidious, too legalistic, to shut down hard conversations.

So as much as I am concerned about bullying, I also believe that if your heart is open, and your intention good, we can do more than not bully, we can extend relationships over difficult cultural and social gaps.

I have watched my big Irish Dad walk into more than one house and cut the tension that might have naturally existed with any different ethnic group by leading with a joke about the ethnic or cultural group faced him. He would say to the Swartzes, "You know the trouble with the Jews." And mostly, not always, but mostly, that irreverent speech helped cut through a tension that preceded their encounter.

I am more concerned about the spirit of our speech than its content because I know that even "bad words" can build trust. Just look at the "N" word.

The "N" word is obviously a word so nasty that I am only willing to share its first initial. Yet, in some inverse way, the "N" word has among some African Americans become a source of identity, symbol of solidarity, and pride. One can argue whether Black people calling each other the "N" word is appropriate, or not, but that debate is theoretical. It happens to people who appreciate it as a bonding source of identity.

We could, maybe should, have an interesting discussion about whether or not the African Americans who throw it around historically understand all the implications of reclaiming a derogatory word as an act of self-acceptance. Good arguments can be made that reengaging that word undermines all those who fought to undo it. It doesn't matter. It is done.

All I know is that I am neither smart enough, brave enough, nor stupid enough to say it. Nor am I smart, brave, or stupid enough to tell African Americans or Black people how to use it. Not going there.

Almost by definition, haven't we reached an area that prudent, cautious language can't touch?

I don't know much, but I know that the road to real interconnection between both bullies and victims, between the races, political parties, and genders is more difficult than not calling someone the "N" word. I know that.

Nor for that matter is calling or not calling anyone the "C" and "B" and "Q" or "F" word going to move us forward. It is an issue of politeness not to use those words, but almost by definition, it is not the words but the unspoken difficulties between us that make those words loaded. And if that is the case, then by definition isn't polite speech is only a beard for deeper racism? I don't know that I am willing to go there, but I am willing to consider it.

Interestingly, as Rev. Jude Geiger lifts up, if you look back to the 1600s, the word "bully" originally meant "sweetheart" or "darling"—such as in the line from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, "From my heart strings I love the lovely bully."

I believe that Buddha and his followers MOSTLY got it right when 2500 years ago they began to talk about Right Speech as a fieldstone on the path to wisdom and enlightenment. Our own friendly witch Sylvia Lawrence always says that "words matter." And she is mostly right. How you talk both reflects and shapes how one thinks, but I know that that journey it is even more complex than watching your tongue. But I'm still going to call them "kids" when she wishes I called them "friends." In my mind, neither one is as important as the inherent warmth, love, and respect held for those "young people."

We are more interesting than that. I believe we should actually keep all but the meanest dialogue open, and only shut it down when it is clear that the intentions of any party are to isolate and harm. To bully.

We are of course never going to get the balance of free speech and right speech right. We are never not going to notice the obvious differences between people be they a different color, race, creed, sexual orientation, weight, gender, or if we think they might have switched genders.

And given that we will never not be interested in our differences, I would much prefer a future in which we encourage a gently curiousness then a world where we are polite lawyers.

The road to healing will be paved with mistakes.

And I want to listen to the people, and create space for the people, who in my home town back in the Boston suburbs, or right here on the hill, want to cautiously voice that "Wow, there are a lot of Asians and people who look like they are from India moving in to town," and might feel a little weird about that.

And in a world of exaggerated advertising, road-rage, hate radio, and political attack spin, being mindful of thought and speech is no mean feat. I get that. When it reaches anywhere near the level of bullying, I am ready for the proverbial sheriff to ride in and stop it, but may we never forget that that it is not politically correct speech that will heal us.

It will be the curious, respectful open hearts that move us forward. It's a dance, and toes will get stepped on while we as humans learn to better and better do it. We are getting there, and the right mix of sensitivity and humor are the steps forward.

Amen