

“Playground (of Life) Rules”

May 19, 2019

STOP IT! In the Name of Love series – Graduation Sunday

SHOW MEDIA: “The Jesus Memo: Bullying”

Last week we started this series with the call to “stop gossip” in the name of love - in the name of Jesus, who is risen and alive among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. His call to make disciples means that we seek to follow him. We trust in his love for us, and we share that love with others.

Gossip is usually done behind someone’s back - rumor spreading and quiet whispers behind the scenes. Sometimes it’s difficult to figure out who’s involved, who started it, and how far it has spread. When we talk about being mean - and more extreme cases like bullying - it’s usually right out in the open. It’s personal and direct, and it’s hurtful and harmful.

All of us have said or done things we wish we could take back. All of us have moments when we react too quickly - and times when exhaustion, irritation, and anger get the best of us. My mom will tell you the story of me as a kid when I finally gave up being tired and proclaimed, “I can’t be pleasant any longer” and then proceeded to stomp up to my room and take a nap.

Perhaps you or someone you know who gets “hangry” - a combination of hungry and angry like the people in the Snickers commercials? (By the way, everyone gets a Snickers today as a reminder to take care of ourselves so that we can be more kind to each other.) And there’s wisdom from children to share **(SHOW SLIDE):** “Sometimes you just need to take a nap and get over it.” - Maura Stuard, age 8. I’d add that sometimes we need a snack, too.

All that is true, but we can’t dismiss the reality of meanness and bullying. I was just in a conversation with a close friend whose daughter was being called “ugly” and taunted by a classmate. Sometimes we relegate bullying to kids in school, but that’s not the only place it happens. The playground can be a cruel place where kids experience bullying, but it can also happen among adults. It happens in homes, in workplaces, in friendships, and sometimes in churches. It’s the most vulnerable who are at risk - always. It’s the power dynamics that we must understand and address. It’s the damage that we must stop.

At the root of it, we have to value kindness. Kindness matters. Kindness makes a difference. Kindness can change things. One act of kindness can have a huge impact. Maybe you remember this quote from “Wonder” **(SHOW SLIDE)** “When given the choice between being right and being kind, choose

kind." Another good word of advice is, "If you can't be kind, be quiet." Andy Rooney, famous for his commentaries on "60 Minutes" said, "I've learned that being kind is more important than being right."

It may be helpful to define a couple of terms as we focus on being mean and bullying today. So here goes...when someone does or says something *unintentionally* hurtful once, it's RUDE. When someone does or says something *intentionally* hurtful once, it's MEAN. When someone does or says something *intentionally* hurtful over and over again, even when you tell them to stop or when you're upset, it's BULLYING.

SHOW SLIDE: BULLY

With those descriptions, how many of us have ever been rude? (By the way, you probably have even if you don't think so.) I'd guess we can think of a time when someone has been rude to us.

How many of us have been mean? We know how to get someone where it hurts. We know how we can make someone feel badly, and we know how it feels because, undoubtedly, it's happened to us. Even worse, meanness usually comes from someone we trust (or thought we could trust). **SHOW SLIDE: spitballs**

The more difficult situation for many of us has been or is bullying. How many of us have been bullied? Someone described it as "meanness by erosion." The specific definition includes behavior that attempts to control, isolate, or harm another person. And we have specific forms of bullying: verbal, social (like excluding someone), physical, and cyber-bullying, which is using technology to harass, threaten, or embarrass someone. Many times it's done anonymously - or is difficult to track. I can tell you honestly that it happens every day among kids - and many times adults.

SHOW SLIDE: kid looking into screen

How many of us have bullied someone else? As I was thinking of this message, I realized that there have been times when I didn't speak up for others or stand up when someone else was being hurt. It doesn't have to be extreme to be powerful. Tearing others down is a cowardly act, and many times, we need to make someone else feel badly so we can feel good. We can't ignore the reality that our words matter and our actions matter. We're accountable for what we say and what we do, and we must hold leaders accountable, too.

I remembered wise words from two elementary school students who told me that unkindness "chips away" at us and at those whom we hurt. It breaks us down and makes us feel less than who we really are. One of them added, "You

have the choice whether to be kind or not. And I'll tell you right now that kindness turns out a lot better."

Bullying may seem like a more contemporary issue, but there were struggles in the early church, too. Whether it was conflict between Jews and Gentiles or rich and poor, there were power plays and clear social divides. There were vulnerable people who were deemed "outsiders."

And we know that Jesus was constantly standing up against a system that tried to push people out. He sought to "draw the circle wide" and include those who were socially ostracized. He stood up for others and didn't allow them to be hurt. Even in his command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, it's not a call to be abused by anyone.

If anything, Jesus sought to restore and heal - and remind us that we are loved by God, that we matter to God, and that we're called to be a part of community. He gave worth back to those who had been called worthless. He gave a place to those who has been kicked out. He gave hope to those who may have been hopeless.

The letters to the early church are filled with reminders to the first Christians to be people of integrity - to make sure that the faith in Jesus they profess matches their words and actions. This passage from Colossians explains Paul's hope for the people in Colossae. Paul didn't have a lot of close contact with the church there, but he had heard of their ministry. He encouraged them and prayed for them. He had hope in them as God's people to be transformed by God's power and love - to stop those behaviors that hurt themselves and others - and to do what Jesus taught and modeled.

Paul called them to set their hearts on things above - to be like Jesus. It can be difficult to focus our attention on God when we are distracted and overwhelmed by the many influences in our lives, when we might be tempted to go along with the crowd, whether it's personal or whether it's the larger community. But what does it mean to follow Jesus?

When we see hateful and mean behavior, we must call it out. We must step in and do the work of Jesus who was Love Incarnate and never missed an opportunity to show it. We are the ones called to remind people of their worth - to God and to us. When we remember that we're beloved by God and that everyone else is beloved, too, that can change the game. We are the ones called to make space for everyone. We are called to bring hope.

You may know that right now, our larger United Methodist Church is struggling with how we welcome all and how we are in ministry with everyone.

I've shared my struggle around the decisions of our General Conference to further discriminate against LGBTQ persons. It's painful for me, and it's hurting people in our church, our family, and our community. When we talk about immigration, we're talking about people whom God loves and calls us to love. Some of you know that this issue is very personal to me and my family. Both of these issues are about the basic humanity of all persons - and the very call of Jesus to love one another. I realize that not we may not be in agreement, but when we talk about the mission of the church, this matters. We must consider what it means to follow Jesus.

Scripture warns us about pride - about thinking of ourselves more highly than others and treating others in ways that we wouldn't want to be treated. Meanness and bullying aren't anything new, but we hear more and see more. We know the tragic stories of young people who are overwhelmed by it and who harm themselves.

Just like the video reminded us - it's not enough to sit back and think that we're not a part of the problem. It's not enough to say that we're not being unkind, so we're OK. It's about reaching out with the love of Jesus and making sure that people know they matter to God. They are loved - period.

I read a Facebook post recently that said, "Compliment people. Magnify their strengths, not their weaknesses." What would it be like if we did that? What would it be like if we followed those rules we know from the playground - *Be safe, Take turns, Share, Include others?*

Maybe you've heard Robert Fulghum's writing called "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." For our graduates, it hasn't been as long as since they were that young, but the lessons ring true:

Most of what I really need
To know about how to live
And what to do and how to be
I learned in kindergarten.
Wisdom was not at the top
Of the graduate school mountain,
But there in the sand pile at Sunday school.

These are the things I learned:

Share everything.
Play fair.

Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life -
Learn some and think some
And draw and paint and sing and dance
And play and work every day some.
Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world,
Watch out for traffic,
Hold hands and stick together.
Be aware of wonder.

*Hold hands and stick together...*that line hit me deeply. What if we committed to being “do something” people - standing up when we see someone being treated badly? What if we started thinking more intentionally before we speak, act, or post something hurtful?

I'd invite you to take the insert in your bulletin (MORE JESUS) and post it somewhere you can see it and perhaps use it as a prayer. Read through it once, and then read it again. These words can guide us as we seek to stop those behaviors that are harmful to our spirits and to the people around us - and to intentionally seek to be more like Jesus.

God, help us to be more like Jesus. AMEN.

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER