

## **Bully? Bullied? Bystander? ~ On Learning To Do Better**

Reflection on Matthew 5: 17, 20-22

Sunday April 10, 2011

Trinity United Ottawa

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“ *‘Pik swarti!’* - ‘black pick!’, I heard them shout as my legs pumped furiously on the bicycle pedals. I was panting and sweating as I sped past the group of sneering white boys. I was afraid of that mocking little gang, but I was also angry. In a few moments I was far enough away that I judged they couldn’t catch me. Only then, heart racing, did I spin around to face them. “*Graf!*” ‘Shovel!’, I yelled, my clever retort. I knew from their tone they had insulted me. But I hadn’t understood the insult: not a “black pick,” a tool to break up hard ground, but “pitch black.”

They learned them so early, these insults of racism. The words of disdain that adults offered at the dinner table were repeated in sneering taunts heard on the street. I ran that gauntlet so many times as a boy. In the black township outside Ventersdorp, where I grew up, for a long time I was the only boy who had a bicycle. On most days my father would send me the few miles to the white town to buy his tobacco or the newspaper. Each trip would include the hostile meeting with that little troop. The taunts of racism were learned early. They didn’t come naturally. They were learned. The painful effects of racism were felt early too.”

Desmond Tutu’s childhood story of being bullied is worn as the taunts of racism, but this name calling, terror inspiring drama is eerily familiar to most of us, isn’t it? It plays out as schoolyard bullying and Facebook character assassination, sexual harassment and homophobia, able-ism and agism, through a continuum of learned contempt that explodes as war-mongering nationalism, nazism and genocide. Bullying can take any form of ‘other-ism’ and it begins with name calling. Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount prescribes fiery retribution to those who label others with demeaning, dehumanizing words. The gospel writer uses exaggeration to bring home his point that murder takes many forms. Contrary to our old adage about ‘sticks and stones’, names can really hurt me.

Racism is one soul-killing form of bullying, which Tutu designates as evil. Treating others with contempt and doing them violence is not a human instinct, he insists, but a learned process that “goes against the grain of creation.” Our instinctive inclination to do good to others is attested to by the lasting good feeling that glows in us, when we act out of kindness and compassion. Doing harm to others only offers the bully a brief moment of triumph and release. This unnatural behaviour is always learned by experience, usually by first being a bully’s victim, or by seeing it work for someone else. Every bully, has their own back-story of being bullied or being a bystander to bullying that seems to win out over good behaviour. Like the aggressor who watched helplessly while his father beat his mother. Which is **no excuse!** But it is part of the explanation of evil behaviour, by humans whom God made for goodness.

The couple of verses in Matthew that denounce name-calling was one of the instigators of this reflection on bullying, during our Lenten series on conflict and resolution. Tutu’s book that we are studying was another. But I knew it was time to address this issue, when two grandmothers among us both shared their deep concern for grandchildren, who have recently been victims of bullying. One, is being harassed because he’s a gentle fellow. Another was nearly hounded out of her highschool by a girl gang dissing her online, because she made the mistake of going out with somebody else’s claimed boyfriend. Parents had to bring in the police in one case. The other parents took evidence of the on-line libel around to the parents of the young perpetrators - getting various responses from shock to contrition to the old excuser ‘boys will be boys.’ Bullying is a very serious business, learned sometimes from abusive parents. Step by step, children learn to do wrong in this way, and so bullying plays out in every forum where unequal power can be abused, from the schoolyard to the workplace to the war zone.

Have you heard the word ‘bullycide?’ There are some shocking and enlightening stories in parent educator Barbara Coloroso’s book: ‘The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander: From preschool to highschool, how parents can help break the cycle of

violence.’ The Columbine killer kids, for instance, were first victims of school bullying, before they became murdering bullies. And you’ve all heard stories closer to home about the gay youth who hangs himself in desperate fear and isolation. It isn’t easy to read these words in the diary of thirteen year old Vijay Singh, about his last week at school:

“I shall remember forever and will never forget

Monday: my money was taken.

Tuesday: names called.

Wednesday: my uniform torn.

Thursday: my body pouring with blood.

Friday: it’s ended.

Saturday: freedom.

On Sunday, he was found hanging from the bannister rail at home.

Though it is comparatively mild, I have my childhood story of being bullied. You probably have your own. And hopefully we’ve all stopped to reflect on when we might have been the bullies. Do you know the four defining features of bullying? Imbalance of power: the bully is older, bigger, stronger, from a higher social rank, etc. Intent to harm: the bully wants to inflict physical or emotional hurt and takes pleasure in witnessing it. Threats of further aggression: both parties know that this is not a one time event. It will keep happening and probably escalate. Terror: systematic use of violence to intimidate and maintain dominance.

Coloroso’s book clearly explains the causes and effects of bullying and victimization, and the choices that can heal both the bullied and the bully. We can equip children with stronger self esteem, nurture their empathy for others, unmask their anger and help them to calm their rage. We can teach kids negotiation, conflict resolution and self defense skills that will help them to survive bullying and not sink to bullying. Above all, we can model through our behaviour as parents and grandparents, teachers, leaders and bosses, that it is never OK to abuse our

advantage or maintain our power - by using verbal or physical violence.

Coloroso's more recent book is about genocide. It traces the bully's path of learned evil behaviour to its horrific culmination. I was struck by the pivotal role of the bystander in all forms of bullying. Her diagram of The Schoolyard Bullying Cycle, which you have there in your bulletin, illustrates all the different choices we can make when bullying happens, whether it is in the daycare or in the camps.

Today, on our Lenten path from conflict to resolution, perhaps we can ask ourselves if we have left any victims in our own wake? If we have modelled bullying by our parenting behaviours, like punishing? And we can check on how much bullying we ignore, condone or tacitly support? Whenever we fail to make the risk-taking choices of becoming active resisters, defenders and witnesses, we tacitly encourage the de-humanizing cycle of bullying to escalate.

Mpho Tutu tells about her feelings when her son chose to be a defender:

“Choosing good regardless of the consequences isn't the province only of freedom fighters. Choices and their consequences confront us every day. Recently my godson, Desmond was standing with a friend outside a fast-food store. A group of boys accosted his friend and began to manhandle him. Desmond sprang to his friend's aid, joining the fray. Desmond and his friend got the worst of it. They were robbed of jackets, shoes, cell phones, and iPods. When Desmond told her what had happened, his mother threw up her hands, uncertain how to respond. “I wanted to scream at him, ‘You could have been killed!’ But I know that if he had left his friend to fend for himself, something essential about my Desmond would have died.” Life is more than breath and a heartbeat.”

Probably all of us at some time have been bullies, (check with your younger siblings!) Most of us have been bullied. And in today's world, we are all bystanders. All three roles demean, dehumanize, deconsecrate our humanity, because we are all bound together in ubuntu community.

Whatever roles of cruelty or passivity or complicity we may have played in the bullying drama, the good news is that we can still choose to make relations right. We can make choices, that though they may not unmake the past, will resurrect the future. We are, after all, made for goodness. Let us hear the Creator's voice, with assurance for the bully as well as the bullied and their bystanders.

“Child I am here.

I know what you are doing.

I weep for you when you slide away from all that is right,  
when you turn your back on all that is good.

I weep for you.

I see the harm that you do.

In my hand I hold your hand.

In my hand I hold the hurting hand of the one you are harming.

Right now,

in this moment,

I stand between the two of you and neither of you see me.

In one hand I hold the hand of my beloved child.

My dear one who is blinded by suffering.

In my other hand I hold the hand of my beloved child  
my dear one whose savagery and shame hide me from sight.

But I am here

beside you both.

Between, within, and all around you both.

I AM.