

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

“Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It is a stock response to verbal bullying in school playgrounds throughout the English-speaking world. It is a response to an insult, implying that “You might be able to hurt me by physical force, but not by insults.” Nothing can be further than the truth. Insults, verbal bullying does hurt! People’s lives have been destroyed by verbal abuse at home, in schools, and business settings. There is a strong link between bullying and suicide. On December 12, 2006, 11-year-old Ben Vodden hanged himself from his bunk bed after being picked on by fellow pupils and the driver of his school bus. Each day 160,000 students skip school each day to avoid the wrath of verbal bullying. Fortunately many schools have policies and programs against bullying which has helped reduce its incidence.

What concerns me, and should concern all of us, is that insults and verbal bullying seem to be acceptable by a large portion of our society. The political discourse that reduces others tragically has a foothold in the United States. President Trump seems to be setting the example. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best.... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” He vilifies immigrants, name-calls women and people living with disabilities. He publicly mocked and made fun of a reporter with a disability. Having grown up in a family of disabled persons, that one hit below the belt for me. He declares any of his opponents losers, lowlifes, and liars. This man has a history of habitually and publicly reducing others. He seems to be reducing that kind of rhetoric. However, it is a rhetoric many people cannot forget. When people compete for attention and accolades, they often do it at the

expense of others, in ways that reduces others. To feel better about themselves, people revert to insults and verbal bullying. What makes it very unfortunate, and frightening in, is that his rhetoric works with a number of U.S. voters.

We see many expressions of reducing others. We do so when we blame the poor, the hungry, the homeless for their plight, blame them for not being able to feed their families, house their families, get insurance. For a couple who make low wages, but work full time, it is literally impossible for them to feed their families adequately, house them adequately, and to obtain medical insurance. When we blame them for their fate, and refuse to help them because we declare it is their fault, declare that they are lazy, we reduce their personhood. When legal immigrants or even American citizens are told to go home, that they don't belong here, we reduce their personhood. When we generalize minority groups and accuse them of being criminals or rapists, we reduce their personhood.

As a nation, we have a history of minimizing the other that we need to own up to. You may have heard that back in our slavery days, blacks were considered three-fifths human. It is not exactly accurate. That was done to reduce the number of representatives to the House of Representatives. To count the blacks as full humans would have given the South a far significant number more representatives in the House and more Electoral votes. Nonetheless, the implication was that they were not full humans.

You may know the story of one famous Nebraskan, Chief Standing Bear. A bust of Standing Bear is in the Nebraska Hall of Fame in our state Capitol. He was of the Ponca Tribe. The Poncas were forced to move to Indian Territory, Oklahoma. When

Standing Bear's son died, he and other Poncas walked back to Nebraska to bury Standing Bear's son. They were arrested for leaving the reservation and held in Omaha to be taken back to Indian Territory. At his court case, chief Standing Bear raised his hand, declared, "That hand is not the color of yours, but if I prick it, the blood will flow, and I shall feel pain. The blood is of the same color as yours. God made me, and I am a man." It was a landmark case that decided that Indians are "persons within the meaning of the law." "God made me, and I am a man."

What a theological statement! God made me. God made every person God does not make any junk, as they say. Jesus, in the way he treated sinners, prostitutes, adulterers, women, lepers, Samaritans, respected all of them and treated them as full human beings.

Jesus healing the blind man is a story about how a man suffers from others' reductions of his personhood. The disciples assume that sin caused his blindness. The Pharisees questioned him about how he was healed. The Pharisees would not believe that his own testimony about his own experience was credible. Why believe him? He's a blind man. When the blind man challenges the Pharisees to notice the "astonishing thing" that Jesus had done, they minimized him by saying that he was "born entirely in sin," and they send him away. The Pharisees called in his parents. Again, why believe him? Talk to his parents. Another way of patronizing the blind man. Throughout the story, others identify him by his disability instead of other characteristics. We are encouraged to use a people language first prescription. For example, instead of calling him a blind man, he should be called a man who is blind or non-sighted. To say blind man defines the man as blind, limits him to being blind. When we say "a man who is

blind,” we are saying here is a man who, among many characteristics, is blind. Disabled people do not want to be identified by their disability. I do want to add that for many Deaf people—deaf people who see themselves as a part of the Deaf culture do define themselves as deaf. I don’t want not make this into a sermon about disabilities. However, this man who was blind is an example of someone who is minimized, made less than fully human. In any case, the man who was blind suffered from others’ reductions of his personhood. Jesus healing him was one way to bring him to full personhood in that day.

Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asks, “Who do we write off as deserving of their fate? When have we dismissed someone's experience? Failed to value and believe another's experience of faith? Driven out someone who disturbed the norms of our community?”

One author shares his experience:

My wife and I used to walk regularly at a nearby beach which is privately owned. In the early days, the girls who check the passes never recognized us; they recognized our car. As long as we were in our own car, they would wave us through, but if we came in a friend's car, we would have to show our pass. I wanted to tell them, "Please look inside. It's not the car that has the pass. We have the pass. We're not our car." Today it is different. Once we got to know them, they stopped looking at the car. Instead, they look at us, smile and say, "Enjoy your walk."

That gives us a clue as to how we can begin to respect others—especially those who are different from us—and treat them as full persons. Get to know them. Seek out a Muslim. Seek out a gay or lesbian person. Seek out a transgendered person. Seek out an undocumented immigrant. Seek out a person who cannot afford health insurance. Get to know them. Learn about their situation. This does not mean you have to agree

with them, or with their lifestyle. However, it can lead to respecting them as full persons, the full persons God made them to be.

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.