

Nobody Likes A Bully

April 22, 2007

(Easter 3 - Year C)

Acts 9: 1-19

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Like many of you, I have been saddened by the events that unfolded at Virginia Tech University this last week.

The violence, the anger, the calculated plans of destruction, the incredible loss of life:

All of these things have left us wondering how a human being could kill 32 other people with a gun.

Cho Seung-Hi, the killer, was a disturbed young man, who harbored evil and violent thoughts for many years.

In the classic sense of the word, the Virginia Tech killer was a terrorist, calculating his violence and bringing terror upon his innocent victims.

We might not like to think of it in these same terms, but in our reading from the Book of Acts, we see that Saul was a terrorist as well.

In the Scriptures, Saul's name is later referred to as Paul.

Because, the name Paul is a Roman derivative of the Hebrew name of Saul.

Yet, Saul, also called Paul, was a terrorist, calculating his violence and bringing terror upon innocent victims.

For, in his own words, Paul writes this about himself in his letter to the Galatians:

“You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism.

I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.”¹

¹ Galatians 1:13

In the Book of Acts, it is recorded that Paul was actively supportive of the killing of this new sect or group of believers, which became known as Christians.

Paul was right there when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death.

Paul asked for a list of names of Christians in Damascus so he could go to Damascus and kill them.

Paul, the killer, was a disturbed young man, who harbored evil and violent thoughts for many years.

In the classic sense of the word, St. Paul was a terrorist, calculating his violence and bringing terror upon his innocent victims.

Paul did not carry a gun or make a video tape of himself, but Paul stoned Christians to death.

Paul wrote letters that speak about his own violent behavior.

Paul was a bully.

After the Columbine shooting incidents, psychologists and researchers began to look more seriously at the phenomena of bullying.

As I have done training sessions over the years in order to be a summer camp director for kids at Camp Allen, part of my training now involves recognizing signs of bullying.

The definition of bullying is this:

Bullying is conscious, willful, deliberate, hostile and repeated behavior which is intended to harm others.²

According to this definition, the apostle Paul was definitely a bully.

Many of us can remember being bullied in school.

I can remember being in the 3rd grade.

And for some reason, there was this one kid, I don't even remember his name, who liked to bully me.

He would snatch my lunch box out of my hand and then he would run with it, running around and around the playground.

² See www.bullying.org

It made me mad.

But, the other kid was bigger than me, so I didn't really know what to do.

My parents told me just to ignore the behavior of this bully.

My teacher also ignored his behavior.

However, after Columbine and after Virginia Tech, we have learned valuable lessons.

We have learned that we cannot continue to ignore the behavior of a bully.

Jesus did not ignore the behavior of the bully named Saul.

And, while Saul was on the road to Damascus, on his way to go and kill more Christians, the risen Jesus appears to Saul in a flash of light and confronts Saul's behavior by saying:

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Saul asks:

"Who are you, Lord?"

And, the answer comes:

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Saul, also called Paul, was bullying, killing and persecuting Christians because he was afraid of losing power and control.

Paul was so committed to the traditions of his Jewish ancestors that he refused to believe that these new Christians could be doing a new thing that was pleasing to God.

So, rather than addressing his fears of losing power and control, Paul resorted to bullying and persecution.

For, bullying and persecution are all about power and control, about who has the power and who doesn't.

I am constantly amazed at the lengths that people will go to, with white-knuckled grips, in order to hang on to power and control.

We have seen this in our own community of Waco, as civic leaders resort to corruption, fueled by power and control, leaving behind a wake of destruction.

We have seen this in our schools, as loners resort to guns to gain power

and control, leaving behind a wake of tragic deaths.
We have seen this in the history of the Church, as leaders of various factions resort to power plays and control games, refusing to believe that God can do a new thing in God's Church.

And, all of our attempts to gain power and control are really a joke.
Because only God possesses the real power.
Only God is in control.

And, it is our fears of inadequacy and fears of loss of power that cause us to bully and persecute others, to drive us to squash the dignity of each human being.

And, the risen Jesus appears to each of us as we journey down the road to Damascus, and asks us:
"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

In our misguided attempts to gain power and control, we might not be *physically* killing each other or using guns to persecute and hurt each other.

Yet, we might be talking about someone else behind their back to try to make us look better.

We might be using disrespectful and demeaning words to our family members in order to cover up our own fears and inadequacies.

We might be scheming to ruin someone's work or reputation so that we can get ahead.

The tragedies at Columbine and Virginia Tech reveal to us the dark side of fear and power and control.

And, the story of the apostle Paul shows us the dark side, as well.

Yet, the life of the apostle Paul also shows us that God can do a new thing in each of us,

Because Paul was a dangerous terrorist, a control freak, a man with a white-knuckled fear of change, a bully.

Yet, this bully was transformed and changed by the power of the love of God.

And, we are transformed by the power of God's love, as well.

For, what my parents told me when I was a kid still remains true today:
Nobody likes a bully.

AMEN.

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