

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Rev. Bethany Peerbolte  
“The Mission: The Cost”  
July 26, 2020

Exodus 10:21-29; Matthew 10:34-39

I want to give you a few names of famous people and I want to see if you can find the common thread between them. Marsha P Johnson, Pablo Picasso, Temple Grandin, Coco Chanel, John Lewis (read them again). Did you find the link? Stonewall, painter, the link is that these are all people who thought the world could be a better place and they devoted their lives to making their vision become a reality. Marsha saw a world where people could safely live their truth and be who they are. Picasso saw a world where art was not restrained by rules. Temple Grandin saw a world where even the animals we eat were treated fairly. Coco Chanel saw a world where what we wear said something about who we are. John Lewis saw a world where every human being could live with dignity and respect. Before each one of these people made their innovation, the lens through which they saw the world was not respected or widely held. Many more people wanted to keep the world as it was. It was not until these people devoted their lives to their vision of their world that the world changed for the better. Their understanding of who they were and what they were called to do made us all realize we can be better.

You can bet for every single one of them there were those who said their world view was off. It's against the law to dress that way, Marsha. No one will like your chaotic painting, Pablo. You have autism, Temple, no one will listen. Women will never buy a dress that isn't corseted, Coco. Don't rock the boat, John, just get over it and let it go. These naysayers were probably everywhere, even in their own home. In the face of those who wanted things to stay the same, these trailblazers mustered the strength to stay on course and help make our world become what it is today.

They set their vision of the world above any earthly relationship. Their priorities are what helped them not lose focus and gave them the power to get through the tough times. Priorities is what Jesus is teaching in Matthew today as well. Jesus says, set God as your highest priority. If you do that you will find yourself on opposite sides as your loved ones, and those disagreements will feel like you are carrying a cross to your own death. It will be like dying, but keeping God as your guide will ultimately lead to gaining a better life.

These verses from Matthew can be hard to hear. Any time Jesus is honest it is hard to hear. We like to sit and listen to the calm Jesus calling the children to his side. We like to ponder the beautiful parables and envision a world where peace prevails. It is harder to watch as Jesus flips tables and sends people away for having small faith or says his way will require swords. Yet here we are with that Jesus today. A Jesus that does not hold any punches but tells the whole truth.

It is recorded here that the path Jesus leads us down will turn family members against one another. Enemies will arise within our own household. Sons against father, daughter against mother-in-law. We hear about families set against one another today and it sounds harsh, but we also know it is not a farfetched scene. When Jesus' followers heard this, they also were not shocked by the idea that families would be split.

It was common knowledge among the Jewish community that when the day of the Lord comes families would be divided in how they react. They expected this. Prophets, like Micah and Isaiah, had warned them this is how it would play out. They understood that God would need to be the priority in one's life, set higher than family ties, to make it out of the battle on the winning side. Not that these fights happen in our families...no, we have all seen it and been a part of it. It's what families do. This does not mean there is love

lost between us though. Jesus is not asking us to neglect anyone, simply to set our priorities correctly. God above anyone else. We can still love our family deeply even through great disagreement. These prophecies about families being split on the Lord's Day is what Jesus is affirming in this message. The way to keep our bearing through the battle is to have a strong relationship with God, stronger than any other relationship. Knowing what God asks of us and what God requires will help us when the people around us think our way of seeing the world is off. People will disagree with the vision, but if we can stop to ask, "Is this the path God is leading us on?" then we will always find the right way forward.

Jesus says he has brought a sword for this battle. When Paul tells us to put on the armor of God the sword is the word of God. It is the word that helps us have the top-notch relationship with God. It helps us get to know what God's vision for the world is. It helps us see the vision we are supposed to devote our lives to making a reality. With the word in hand, we can check what we are fighting for against scripture. Does this path seek justice? Does this path love mercy? Does this path allow me to walk humbly? Does this path love "love" and hate "hate?"

The answers we get from the Word are the ones we are to follow, regardless of family dissent. This is not a small task, for sure. Jesus is saying we need to know God better than we know our spouses, children, and parents. To stay true to what God calls us to requires swords, it requires sacrifice, it requires trust, it requires extensive discomfort to the point of carrying our own cross, to the point of losing the life others run after to gain our life in the kingdom. No wonder Jesus has to make this point about priorities. It is so much easier to follow the people around us than it is to follow God, because it is easier to build relationships with people and easier to go with their view of the world. We need to be reminded who we serve, reminded who we have committed our lives to follow. One might ask at this point, what happened to honoring our father and mother? Again, Jesus is not asking us to cut ties with anyone. There is, however, a difference between honoring someone and agreeing with them. I think Moses does this very well in our first lesson.

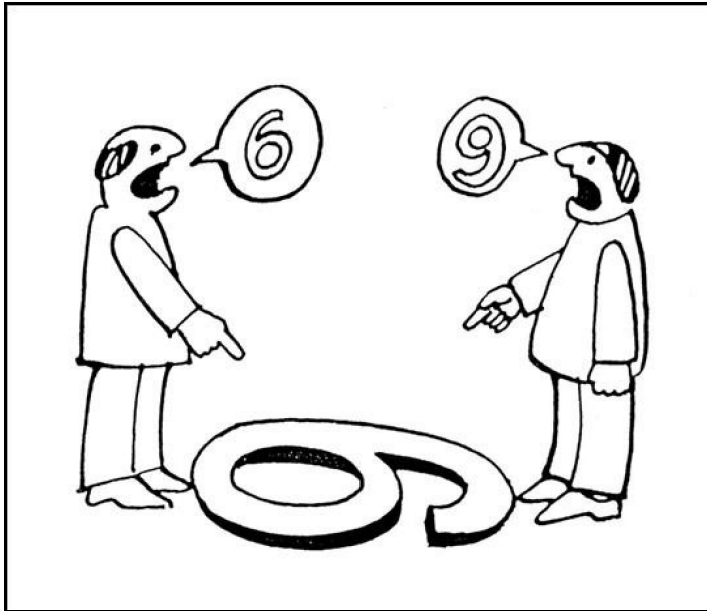
Moses has debated with Pharaoh. He has gone back multiple times to argue for the people. Every time Pharaoh has sharpened his argument and demanded more proof, and every time God helps Moses meet those demands. In the exchange we read today, Moses has done all he can to get through to Pharaoh and has endured enough. He has to set a strong boundary to keep God's vision alive and to keep himself on the path forward. He does this by engaging good boundaries and clearly knowing the difference between rude behavior, mean behavior, and bullying behavior.

When Moses goes to Pharaoh this time, the leader of Egypt starts by agreeing to let the people go out into the wilderness to worship their God, but their livestock need to stay behind. This is rude behavior. It is offensive to Moses because it denies a true worship experience for the people. Moses stays calm and explains to Pharaoh that they will need to sacrifice some of the livestock, and they won't know which ones or how many until God reveals the sacrifice to them during the time of worship. Moses gives Pharaoh the benefit of the doubt and offers a correction for the rude behavior. Instead of learning and understanding, Pharaoh revokes his good will and lashes out at Moses. This is mean behavior. Pharaoh knows better but refuses to change the offer. He intentionally offends Moses and refuses to change his rude behavior once educated. In fact, because this behavior is in line with a pattern of repeated aggressiveness towards Moses we have crossed into bullying territory.

This is it for Moses. He sets a firm boundary. He will not be back to talk to Pharaoh, he will not see his face again. He will not be treated like this anymore. Moses was willing to correct rude behavior and forgive someone willing to change their ways. Moses was willing to endure the mean attacks, but the minute Moses connected the dots and saw the pattern of aggression, he was out. He would not endure a bully.

Knowing the difference between rude, mean, and bullying behavior will help us set boundaries. Knowing what we are willing to put up with to move God's vision forward will help us navigate disagreement and conflict in a loving and honorable way.

Now most of our arguments will come over a difference of opinion. This comic shows what a difference of opinion is. Neither person is wrong. They just have a different perspective. A good conversation will ask questions of each other and maybe even get a chance to change places and see from the other person's view. They may think differently in the end or they may not, but at least they tried to see the world a different way.



Now if I had said, "That's wrong, how could you think that way?" that would have been rude of me. If I had gone on social media and told the world the Cindy doesn't know her numbers, that would be mean. And if I repeatedly brought up the conversation in a mocking way or aggressively called Cindy names that would be bullying.

Rude, mean, and bullying are important distinctions for us to make when we engage in a conversation over a difference of opinion.

Rude is when someone accidentally says something that hurts our feelings. The statement or action is not made with intention to hurt. It often comes from a place of simply not knowing how the words or actions will be felt. When someone is rude it

usually only takes an honest response to correct the behavior. For example, I use the word crazy a lot. But recently a friend told me that word holds a lot of pain because she had been called crazy because of a mental illness she has. I apologized and asked her if she wanted to share her story with me. And now I'm working to be better. I still slip up a lot, but I now can hear myself when I say it and correct myself with a more descriptive word.

Mean is when someone intentionally says or does something to hurt another. There is active aggression when someone is mean. Depending on the level of meanness, we may be able to help the other person become kinder or we may need to set up a boundary to protect ourselves. We can say I am willing to be called this or that and offer an honest response about how that hurts me...twice. After that I am going to leave the conversation because it is clear the person is not ready to hear my feelings. Or we can set a boundary of I'm willing to withstand verbal attacks to help someone see the world another way, but if it turns physically violent, I will leave.

Setting boundaries like this before we get into a discussion helps us know our limits when we get to them. We don't have to process in the moment and can leave the minute we want to. Bullying is a repeated aggressive and intentional attack on someone. Patterns of meanness is bullying behavior. Bullying sometimes will happen even when we have left the situation. When someone is bullied, they often hide because they feel like they did something to deserve the repeated attacks. Let's just make the boundary now as a community that we will not tolerate our people suffering the attack of a bully alone. The best way to defend against a bully is to gather people around the victim. When I went through bystander training, they

gave us the example of someone being yelled at on a subway for wearing a hijab. They taught us to simply go and sit with the person in the hijab. No need to talk to them or engage the bully. Simply putting our bodies closer to the victim can shift the dynamic enough for someone to stop.

Understanding these three words, rude, mean and bullying can help us set boundaries around the disagreements we may have with loved ones. If someone violates a boundary, that is rude. We need to calmly inform them of our boundaries so they know better, like Moses did when he taught Pharaoh about the sacrifice situation during worship. If someone knows our boundary and still violates it, that is mean. Once Pharaoh learned the rules, he still ignored the needs of the people. If someone repeatedly violates the boundaries, like Pharaoh had throughout his discussions with Moses, that is bullying. That is when Moses set a boundary to not converse with the bully any longer. I would say it is a good boundary for us all to set. Bullies aren't ready to listen anyway. There can be any number of boundaries we can set for ourselves. We can even sit down with family and discuss what the house rules will be. We can say we only talk about a controversial topic for 30 minutes then we change the subject. Or no politics on Christmas, bring it all on the fourth of July. Boundaries help us clear out the extra anxiety too. We don't have to worry if a conversation will go too far, so we can be calmer in the moment, keeping our voices and body language more peaceful.

If we have a different world view than loved ones, there are going to be arguments. We can't avoid a topic completely. Boundaries help us have these conversations in a loving and respectful way.

I wish Jesus had said it would be cupcakes and rainbows, but we got a sword. We also got a promise, that if we keep our relationship with God strong, we will change the world. Our relationship with God gives us what those trailblazing world changers did. It tells us who we are. They understood their purpose deeply, they were connected to the image of God within them. That thing, that Spirit, that God had placed in them, is what they were always faithful to. They knew who they were and what they stood for, and no matter what anyone said around them they stayed true to their calling. God is calling us too. Begging us to know God better than we know anyone else and promising when we do this, we will gain a life worth living.

Let us pray for this to become our reality.