

A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson

One of my most memorable experiences during Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) happened when the nurses on my floor asked me if I could help them get someone in to see his dying mother. The problem was he was estranged from his 12 siblings, and they didn't want him in the room. The nurses had tried and failed. They turned to me almost as a last resort, although maybe my supervisor told them to send me in to see what would happen. I cannot remember what I said to them. I think it was only by the grace of God that I got him into the room. I stood guard while he spoke to his mom and was glad when we were both safely out in the hallway.

I sometimes think of that experience when churches tell me, "We're just like a family." Unfortunately, not all families treat each other well. They can be physically abusive as well as verbally abusive. Unfortunately, that also happens in the church. We are clear that physical and sexual abuse is wrong; sometimes, though, we seem willing to put up with verbal abuse. We let people get away with behavior we would not tolerate anywhere else. We think we need to be loving and forgiving. While that is generally true, we can also allow what we think that means to paralyze us, which lets bullies run free – causing harm, creating stress, and driving people away from the church.

Perhaps the best way to handle bullies is to stand up to them, to reject their demands, to confront them when we witness their bad behavior. We can refuse to tolerate their abuse.

Sometimes, people chose to shun bullies. They may say hello if they have to walk by them, but they turn away if they see them coming. Essentially, they choose not to engage them in conversation or play their games. That takes a lot of energy, though, and such vigilance can be tiring. We might wonder if that's really worth the effort, or if we'd be better off just staying at home or even deciding to join another church.

Ideally, how should we treat one another? It can be too simplistic to ask, "What would Jesus do?" The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple suggests that even Jesus had his limits. There are also numerous sayings where Jesus refers to the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites or even fools. I'm not sure we want to encourage that kind of behavior or the use of that kind of language, even though there is biblical precedent for doing so.

Maybe we begin by using "I" statements, acknowledging and taking responsibility for our feelings. We could also talk *to* the people we have problems with, rather than *about* them. We could limit our statements to things we have seen or experienced ourselves, rather than talking about things other people have told us. That in itself might stop a lot of gossip. If we hear someone disparaging another person to whatever degree, we might volunteer to go with them while they talk out their problems with that individual.

It can be easy to ignore the bullying; to put up with the sniping, griping and complaining; and to accept the drama that goes along with it. We may have gotten so used to it that it can be easy to think that things really aren't all that bad. Perhaps we choose to abdicate any responsibility and refuse to do anything about it because we've experienced the same things, if not worse, within our own family.

We can begin to change the culture of the church and make our churches a safe space (or at least a safer space) for everyone by refusing to allow bullying, by stopping it when we see it, and by holding people accountable. It's not going to be easy and it won't be fun, but I imagine that's what Jesus would do and what he would want us to do. Doing so can provide the wider world with a model for listening with respect and for demonstrating what it takes for people with different ideas and opinions to get along.

What else would you add? What else can we do? What else should we do to treat one another with respect, courtesy, and love? Indeed, what will it take so that they "will know that we are Christians by our love?"