

Bully and Bullied Alike  
Luke 13:31-35  
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Preached February 24, 2013 at San José, Costa Rica

Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, was a bully. Not as bad as his father, Herod the Great, but a bully nonetheless. This is a man who tried to bully his brother out of his share of their violent father's estate, even when there was a will entitling him to one fourth of it, a man who left his first wife, the daughter of the Arabian king, for the ex-wife of another of his brothers, a man so cowardly that he was forced to live up to a ridiculous oath that resulted in John the Baptist's head upon a silver platter, and who was so gutless he wouldn't even take a position on Jesus' guilt or innocence when Pilate sent Christ to him for judgment. There is not as much written about Antipas as about his father, Herod the Great, but the Herodian apple never fell far from its tree, and so the Herod of our story tonight inherited a legacy of violence, deceit and intrigue worthy of a distinguished place in the World History Bullies Hall of Fame.

It was this reputation to which certain Pharisees were responding, or appealing, when they reported to Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him. Whether they were truly worried for his safety, or thought they could scare him off the scene by making up realistic sounding threats by Herod, doesn't really matter much for our purposes tonight except to make very clear that Herod Antipas was the type of person who made his way through life by means of fear, power, and

violence. That's what bullies do. Maybe you are well acquainted with bullies, having been subjected to their vices in your childhood, or even in your job. Maybe you were a bully once, but are now reformed and repentant. Maybe you are a bully now but just don't know it. The truth is that there is at least a little bit of bully in each one of us. Listen to this definition of bullying and see if it doesn't sound a bit like what we call sin: "Bullying is unwanted, intentional, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose." I would add only that bullying doesn't stop when we graduate. Most of us, in one way or another, exercise some measure of power over someone or something, and we often do it badly. Most of us are repeat offenders, whether by intention, or inability to recognize or control our behavior. Most of us would rather not think of ourselves as bullies, and certainly it is a matter of degrees, but we are, or could be bullies, even if it is an uncomfortable truth.

It's also uncomfortably true that each of us is the bullied, if not by obnoxious kids on the playground, then by powers and principalities, worldviews and ideologies. None of us are in a position of supreme power, and so we are

tossed around by the relentless patterns of subjugation and humiliation that keep us all bound until we all are free. Every bully is a victim of someone's way of viewing the world, and so even as bullies, we feel the burden of the blows, insults, and terror heaped on us in both our formative years and our everyday lives.

Let's be clear. I am not in any way diminishing the reality of bullying. I was a victim of it for much of my fourth through sixth grade years. A few months ago, I shared with you the story of Amanda Knox, the bullied Canadian teenager who eventually committed suicide, even after making a YouTube video plea for help. With the advent of social media, the opportunities for bullying have multiplied exponentially, with cyberbullying leading the way. You don't need a playground these days. Or a spitball. Just the ease of a Facebook or Twitter account. You can even bully anonymously, and continuously. Educators are calling it an epidemic. Yes, bullying is real, and awful, and more and more often deadly. But it also offers us a Lenten opportunity to look deep into our hearts of darkness and pain, and see some Gospel at the bottom. Let's start with an amazing video I saw, made around a poem by Canadian poet Shane Koyczan, by a team of animators who each contributed 20 seconds of art to the project, and then all the art was then compiled into this amazing seven minutes and thirty-seven seconds. [Take a look.](#)

Jesus was not intimidated by bullies. Not Herod, not Pilate, not Satan. Jesus calls their bluffs. To Herod he says, "Tell that fox for me, 'listen...today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way'"; To Pilate he says, "Everyone

who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'; to Satan he says, "Get behind me."

No, Jesus was not intimidated by bullies. But he was subjected to them. Beaten, mocked, and scorned. Humiliated, despised, crucified. Jesus knows bullying. Jesus knows power abused, and applied aggressively, intentionally, and repeatedly. Jesus knows what everyone who's ever been bullied feels. But Jesus also knows something else. Jesus knows they were wrong because Jesus knows who he is. Remember those wondrous words spoken at his baptism, echoed at his transfiguration: "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." That's what Jesus knows. That's what the victims of bullying need to know. That's what the bullies need to know. That's what you and I need to know. That's what the world needs to know. We are the brood under Jesus' wings, if we are but willing.

As the end of the video suggests, somewhere, somehow, some place inside, those who survived bullying realized something about themselves: that it was not the bully who defined them, but something else. And whether or not they recognized that identity as something divinely bestowed, it is; for it is the very image of God in which each of us was created, whether we know it or not, whether we believe it or not, whether we live like it or not. None of our failures or inability to recognize God in us has the power to limit that God *is* in us. And that is just as true for the bully as the bullied.

This, I think, is the only real prevention and antidote to bullying, that the bully and bullied alike know that Jesus Christ defines them, not what their parents,

their peers, their televisions or their Facebook accounts say about them, no matter how negative, or positive, those messages may be. Bully and bullied alike need to know that there was someone willing to die for them, to put a stop to the humiliation, by being one who neither struck back, turned a blind eye, or joined in the torture, but by being supremely confident in God's love for him. Bully and bullied alike need to know power is an illusion, as Herod, Pilate, Satan and every other bully in Jesus' time learned, as they witnessed true power through his resurrection, and the Holy Spirit who led them to share it with the world.

Lent is the time to call out the bully in each of us, and put that bully in its place, as Jesus did with Herod. Lent is the time to remind ourselves that being bullied cannot define us, as Jesus did with Pilate. I invite you, as part of your observance of a Holy Lent, to take a good hard look at whether there is any part of you that might subject any other person to any kind of humiliation, and repent and seek God's forgiveness. And if you are, or have been, in any way made to feel bad about how you were created in the image of God, you in all your perfect and unique glory, by a bully in your life, I invite you to seek the shelter of Christ's wings, and the comfort of his church. Let us, this Lent, be those who comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable, bully and the bullied alike. Amen.