

## *Shiloh United Methodist Church*

[Lamentations 5:12](#)

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[James 4:1-3](#)

### ***Broken: Bullying and a Lack of Civility***

Worship Intro:

In news media, on the internet, in person. Any form of bullying can torture the soul and make us doubt ourselves. We leave situations of bullying with “wrecking balls inside our brain.” Wondering what we could have done to stand up and change the situation.

I hear from the later generations that this world used to have more civility, and I hear from younger generations a cry for peace whether or not there used to be more of it.

As we begin worship today, I invite us to pray for peace. I invite us to pray for respect for all of creation, each person and creature. I invite us as a community to pray that we may be strong enough to stand for peace.

Sermon:

We are in the midst of our series of messages on the theme Broken. This is an exploration of the Broken places in our lives and how God works within them to bring expressions of his love and grace. As Christians we believe that even when life is hard that our God is with us, journeying alongside us, and helping us to continue to be a part of God’s story of grace in the world.

To map this journey we are using two scriptural books: Lamentations and the wisdom book of James. James is a book of self-help advice for

how Christians can live. Today you will find in our passage sage advice for how to handle conflict by owning our portion.

Lamentations is a book in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that is created to show us that we can cry out to God for help. This entire book is full of city laments from prophets who are concerned about the nation of Israel, and hoping God might be a part of making the changes needed in their people's hearts.

In our world, today we are seeing levels of bullying seemingly increase and civility decrease. Bullying being that action where people with seeming power over others continue to overpower them through actions that either induce violence or submission. We have seen it through politicians making threats or calling people cowardly who are in no position to overpower the said politician.

This same behavior we are seeing online in comments on news articles or on social media. People baiting fights and demeaning those they disagree with. This lack of treating others with respect, and instead devaluing them is drifting into real world interactions. We don't see civil conversations on hard topics, instead we hear about public hearings on bills in which both sides find ways to demean the other in the paper or in the room, so as to make the other look less than human.

The writer of Lamentations seems to know exactly what we are talking about:

Lamentations 5:12 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>12</sup> Officials have been hung up by their hands;  
elders have been shown no respect.

This isn't a passage about old people getting disrespected, so much as it is about people who should be respected leaders and wise ones in our community being bullied and set aside. The write of lamentations is let us know the extent to which bullying and uncivil behavior to one

another can destroy us from hearing from those who can give us guidance.

First a story to help us understand the strength it takes to overcome the type of thing we are talking about today.

Sue Monk Kidd writes of a time when she popped into a drugstore where her fourteen-year-old daughter worked after school. The mother paused for a moment when she spied her daughter kneeling in the aisle stocking a bottom shelf with toothpaste. As she watched, two middle-aged men walked up the aisle and paused behind the daughter. One smirked to the other, “Now that’s how I like to see a woman—on her knees.” The other man just chuckled as the daughter, hearing it all, dropped her head in humiliation.

As Kidd describes it, something in her was pierced to the core. She watched her daughter, crouched and disgraced, and saw in her every woman shamed into submission before condescending men. She knew, if she walked away in silence, her daughter’s spirit could dim, condemning her to the interior posture of always being down on her knees. Kidd was not going to let that happen.

She walked up to the two men and said, “I have something to say to you and I want you to hear it.” The men stopped laughing. “This is my daughter. You may like to see her and other women on their knees, but we don’t belong there. *We don’t belong there!*”

The two men were dumbstruck. Then one of them said snidely, “Women,” and the two walked away.

The daughter rose and smiled at her mother. Her mother smiled back. Then they parted, one back to work, the other back home. That night, the daughter came to her mother’s bedroom. “Mama,” the daughter said, “about this afternoon in the drugstore.”

“Yeah?”

“I just wanted to say, thanks.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus dealt with these kinds of challenges in his day too. I think that is why Matthew 5 is written in such a specific way, because Jesus wanted to make sure his disciples would know what it would mean to counter bullying and a lack of civility in their world. The striking thing is like our previous story, these measures of compassionate and brave response towards bullying that he teaches will not change the situation immediately, but through compassionate resolve the perpetrator of the civility lacking reality will slowly realize that all God’s children have power.

Before I give you some examples I want to highlight a word that people need to know to understand a true lack of civility. The word is “other,” and it is important because for any bully to take part in their action they have to other the one they perpetrate against. In other words, they have to convince themselves somehow that the person is less deserving of dignity and is lesser themselves. Once you have made something less important than you, you can justify almost any behavior.

Jesus understood this concept well, he had seen it happen to his friends, and family who were being ruled by Rome. Rome had a no tolerance policy for people who were not Roman receiving respect. They were known to violently put down any kind of revolt with severe retribution. On top of this law were the Jewish laws which stated some people were greater or lesser than others. These laws, lined up to create rules that kept some people in lower classes and others much higher.

If someone who was seen as superior in the culture was to find you lesser and use the law to inflict punishment you had a few options: You

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<sup>1</sup> “That’s How I Like to See a Woman” by Sue Monk Kidd—excerpted from *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 7-10. Reprinted in Laura Slattery et. Al. (eds.) *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living* (Oakland, CA: Pace e Bene Press, 2005) 20-21. (Thanks to Frank Rogers Jr. who has this in his book and permitted me to borrow the content.)

could accept the punishment and return to your submission. You could fight and risk retribution.

Jesus offered a third way and we should consider it today.

Let me share some examples.

Jesus said, “When some strikes you on your right cheek, you are to

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You all know this answer, you turn the other cheek. Do you know why?

(Two people came forward and I used them to demonstrate.)

When someone in these times struck, they would use their right hand. You could only strike an inferior person with the palm of your hand. When this was done, it would turn the victim's head. To turn the head back was a clear act of defiance, but it left the person striking with a dilemma. You could not strike with your left hand, because in ancient days this was the unclean hand, it was used to clean yourself and there were no sinks. To strike with that hand would disgrace the person using it to strike. With the other cheek offered you could not simply strike with an open hand you would have to use a fist. This would symbolize you consider the person you were striking as equal.<sup>2</sup>

See how this might provide a third way to deal with the bully, offering Jesus' spiritual third path can you imagine how this might help in the real world.

The second scenario involves Jesus' idea in sharing, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with them a second mile.” For Roman soldiers they could requisition a Jew for service. Remember how Simon of

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<sup>2</sup> Work in this sermon was taken directly from Rogers, F. (2015). *Practicing compassion*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room. Frank's teachings were invaluable to this topic. I give full credit for this sermon to his great and Christ-centered work.

Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross. This was under these pretenses. There were rules around how much you could be forced to do for a Roman soldier.

(Two people came forward to demonstrate.)

You see the soldier could force you into service for one mile. However, if they did it for longer than that they would be penalized and punished. This would place the soldier on the defensive and may even result in the soldier begging for his pack back.<sup>3</sup>

The final example Jesus uses involves the if someone sues you for your coat, share your cloak also.

(Two people came forward to demonstrate.)

In the laws of Exodus and Deuteronomy it was practiced that if you were in debt and with no money the person who you owed money to could sue you for your coat. This meant that each day you would have to go to the court and turn your coat over to them, only then to get it back every evening. The law was not completely cold, you quite literally could be kept warm by your coat. However, the humiliation of each day turning over your coat would remind you of the debt you owed. The cloak Jesus referred to was quite literally their underwear. It was the cloak under the coat, and they wore nothing else. If you were to offer your cloak too, then you would be naked. According to the same law your nakedness was not embarrassing to you, but would disgrace the one who saw you naked. Along with this you now stood in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah who stood naked to remind Israel of its embarrassing practices and need to reconnect with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Rogers, F. (2015). *Practicing compassion*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room.

James 4:1-3 Common English Bible (CEB)

**4** What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? <sup>2</sup> You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.

We are called to be a people of Jesus' finding the third way. We are called to consider this way in the light of all we currently face in our world. Consider for a minute the places you might need to find a third way in your life to overcome a lack of civility as I share this story.

Reverend James Lawson, was one of the people who worked with Martin Luther King Jr. Lawson was once leaving a café in the rural south and someone passing on a motorcycle spit in his face and the parked his bike across the street. Lawson wiped off his face and walked over to the perpetrator. Stood proud and asked the cyclist for directions to a nearby town. Not expecting this response to spit in the face, the cyclist treated Lawson as his equal and shared directions.

As we consider this broken place in our world this week, I invite us to go from here considering the Jesus way forward. How might we as Christian people respond with compassion to an online bully or one in a store, respond in a way that draws dignity and respect back into our world.

Perhaps when seeing bullies online we might pause, breathe, and find a third way to draw them out of their shell that allows us to maintain dignity and them to realize we are their equal. Perhaps it can't happen

online and the bravest thing is to turn off the computer and face those people in realize with our other cheek turned.

I pray for you wisdom on this journey, so that as the book of James we don't waste this life on our own cravings, but instead on the cravings of God's love being present in the world.

Shalom and Amen