

Rev. Nathan Detering
Sunday, January 21, 2018

“Bullies and Bruises”

Given at UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Keep our hearts tender.
Keep our eyes soft.
Because what shows up as conceit, bad manner, or bullying
Is often a sign of things no eyes of seen and no ears have heard.
And so we learn again how there is no answer but to love one another.
We gather in community to practice being the person
The world is calling us to be.
We cannot do everything,
But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.
So forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That is how the light gets in.”*

Billy was like clockwork.

At 3:05pm Sister Antonio would ring the wooden-handled bell

Over the intercom,

And the 1st-8th grade girls and boys would pour out of the blue-70's paneled

Two-story box that was Our Lady of Lourdes,

The girls in their green and blue plaid with a thin yellow stripe plaid dresses,

And the boys with our blue pants and tucked-in scratchy white shirts,

The boys who had hit their growth spurt that earlier that year easily marked

For the white faded crease where their moms had let down the cuff to make
The pants longer to help them last one more year.

In a sea of uniforms, any variance one could achieve was how it was decided
Who was cool and who was not; who was in and who was not.

And nothing did that at our Lady of Lourdes like the shoes, which

By regulation had to be ‘dressy,’

Which these suburban St. Louis kids translated as ‘preppy,’

Which meant that even in that midwestern city so far from sail boats

And lobsters and Cape Cod

every who was cool had to have brown, beautiful, LL Bean...boat deck
shoes.

Oh yeah.

But not Billy. Because even though he had a bright lights and big city
Vegas name – *Billy Diamond* –

Billy, like clockwork, strutted out of that prison box of a school every
afternoon,

Yanked the tails of shirt out of his pants,

Flipped up his collar,

Checked the laces of his black, big-soled, Buster Brown day-trippers,

Slung his backpack over his left shoulder,

Put on his pout,

And began his 1.2 mile march home.

Billy was one grade ahead of me, his brother Jo two more,

And unlike so many of us who had been in the school since Kindergarten,

Billy and Jo were transplants, arriving only the year before.

Which meant that despite the school being Catholic and all of us
Learning day after day about Jesus welcoming the stranger and the
Samaritan and all that,
Billy and Jo were made to feel like outsiders and interlopers
At every turn,
An identity that Billy, in particular, seemed to embrace,
He ramping up the ire especially during recess when he would
Swipe the big red ball we used for four-square
And bounce it over the chain-link fence that circled the rectory.

As a church community, we have been learning about how to
Stand up as an upstander to behavior to that hurts others,
But back then I was best at being the bystander,
Having learned from a family that had its fair share of conflict
The skills of conflict-avoidance, peace-making, people-pleasing,
And not rocking the boat.
Maybe I'm not alone here.
So when Billy would swipe the ball I would bystand or downstand
And keep the anger inside, bottled up, pushed down, boiling,
Which has a way of turning a person into something like a shaken-up
Bottle of soda, ready to explode.
And again, maybe I'm not alone here.

But here was the problem: I couldn't ignore Billy.

I mean, I tried..

But Billy was hard to ignore because his 1.2mile march home was
Exactly the same as mine, he living on Pershing Blvd and me on

Waterman Ave, only one block away.

I can't remember exactly when the taunting began that year.
All I remember is trying to keep at least five-driveways behind him.
But because I was the oldest and was in charge of ushering home Anna,
My sister 3 years younger, and who was young enough then to put
exuberance before caution,
And eagerness before restraint,
Anna would always run ahead, squealing and bouncing, jumping
And darting the way second-graders do,
Her black hair falling out of the ponytail in wisps across
Her brown cheeks and brown-black eyes,
She not yet aware that as an adopted girl from Vietnam
Some saw her as different, foreign, alien, unwelcome.

"Hey Detering!" Billy yelled one day after Anna stepped on the heels
Of his Buster Browns.

"How can this be your sister?"

"Uh....uh...Because!" I yelled back, which wasn't exactly the comeback
I was looking for.

And because bullies can be perceptive, because their vulnerability
From which their bullying behavior springs
Allows them to pick up on the vulnerabilities of others,
From that day on Billy knew he had me.
He was brutal. It didn't matter if I led Anna on a new route,
Or if waited until long after the school bell rang.
He always seemed to find us so that he could hurl new insults

At Anna and me that were so polished, and delivered with such precision,
That these years later I am sure he rehearsed them the night before.

And where did the hurt go, the bruises, the rage? Where does your go?
In a culture that at once values ‘niceness’ mixed with passive aggressive
Platforms that allow us to zing our anger without actually
Confronting the pain that is beneath it all,
It’s easy to put on the face of ‘nice’ and bury all the boiling bruises down.
That is, until we can’t.

“*Hey Detering!*” yelled Billy from his porch one warm spring day,
My relief at not having seen him on the walk home suddenly punctured.
“*Your sister is a _____*” and there in the blank space you can insert
Any number of vile, racist words you can imagine - each sound a
weaponized vowel, a weaponized consonant.
And do you know how sometimes your body is doing something your mind
Is not even aware of?
Because even before I knew what was happening I found myself running
Up the stairs onto Billy’s porch,
The voice inside me making noises I didn’t know my 5-grade body owned.
And then there was Billy, suddenly jumping into the stance he must have
learned in martial arts class,
Which is an irony I’m only getting now as I’m preaching this,
And here comes Billy at me, at me,
His right hand swinging back and then landing with a ‘THWUMP’
Right in the center of my chest.

Can you hear it with me? Can you feel it?
Funny, not as in ha-ha, but as in odd, how
I've been thinking of Billy this month as with you I've heard
A couple sermons here on the theme of forgiveness and imperfection
And giving up grudges,
And I read, sipping morning coffee, about Sarah Silverman's
Sainted response to Jeremy, the bruising and bruised bully that Sarah
Helped to heal beyond the pain of his words,
And, let me say it plain, felt bullied yet again by the news cycle
And trying to explain to my kids why, no, they shouldn't
Speak about people the way the president of the United States does
Again and again, so very often acting the bully in chief.
And felt again, this month, that old, familiar tension between pushing
Down the anger and avoiding conflict or letting it fly in a flurry
Of fuming words, because remember sometimes we are bullied
And sometimes we are the bully!
And, yes, rolled my eyes at the church, forgetting that I'm one of the
minister of a church, that asks me to forgive me enemies, and sow love
Where there is hate, and bring peace where there is rage.
Because listen, Billy Diamond said hateful, racist things about my sister
And so did the President, about people with brown skin like her,
And there all kinds of things happening in our lives that provoke
Anger and cry out for resistance and witness, not acceptance and agreement.
How do I become the person I want to be, the world needs to be, when
What the world needs are so many different, conflicting things?

So what are we supposed to do? So what comes next?

So what happened with Billy???

“THWUMP” landed the hand against my chest.

And instead of raising my hand or hitting back,

I said this: *‘Billy, that didn’t even hurt.’*

Which was a lie.

“You may not show it, but you’re crying inside.”

Which was true. But then I said:

“Maybe, but so are you.”

And then I walked down the stairs,

Grabbed Anna’s hand, and went home.

Friends, I’m not sure I understood what happened that day.

I’m still not.

But I know this – Billy left us alone after that,

And a ‘For Sale’ sign popped up in his yard that summer,

He moving off into his life and me into mine and Anna into hers.

What was going on with Billy on the inside that he acted the way he did

On the outside?

What wars were going on inside that house or inside him

That no eyes saw and no ears heard where the spirit meets the bone?

Am I supposed to care?

Are we supposed to pay attention to the pain that so often is the source

Of people’s painful behavior toward us and the people we love,

That so often is the source of the pain we cause others?

How do we help hold each other accountable to the crying that is

Happening on the inside?

Questions like these haunt and hover me,

Which tells me they are worth asking.

Which is why we come here together, we the bruised and the bruisers,

The bullied and, sometimes yes, the bullies,

Helping each other name what is beneath the surface, tears and joy on

On the inside,

Here in the pews saying Sunday after Sunday:

Peace my sister; peace my brother, peace my child, peace my minister,

Peace, peace, peace...

Hymn: #323