

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Heal or Hurt

Matthew 5:9

Sunday, January 22, 2023

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."

For many people the Broadway play *The Elephant Man* is one of the greatest Broadway plays ever produced.

The play is based on the real life of John Merrick, a man who lived in London and the late 19th century, who was severely deformed - so deformed that he actually was a side show for the circus that would travel through town. He was relentlessly teased. Mobs would chase him and throw things at him.

There was a happy ending to his story. There was a time when he was being chased by a mob and a police officer and a train conductor grabbed him and put him in a room and barred the door, making sure the mob didn't get to him because they were so threatened by the way he looked. A Dr. Travis showed up and rescued Merrick and turned him from being an object of pity and scorn to a respected member of the community.

I'm particularly touched by a scene in *The Elephant Man* that actually comes up in my mind and my heart and my soul quite often. Merrick is sitting in that room being barricaded from the mob. He's crying out, but the train conductor and the police officer don't understand what he's trying to say. And at one point he actually says, "Jesus," but they don't make it out. And then Dr. Travis shows up and something comes out of Merrick from the depths of his soul that anybody could make out. He simply cries out, "Help me, help me."

There's something about that story and there's something about those two words that resonate with me. There are many people in our world who are screaming out, "Help me!" Many people in our community are screaming out, "Help me!" The world is screaming out, "Help me."

So we have a choice. Are we going to be troublemakers or peacemakers? Are we going to tear down or are we going to build up? Because make no mistake about it, folks, those who divide and those who tear down, well, they're doing the devil's work, but those who bring peace and those who bring unity, they are doing God's work. There will always be those people in the world who do

nothing but tear down. If they're not in the midst of a quarrel, they're causing a quarrel and they are doing the devil's work. But there are also always those people who bring peace to any situation, who bring unity to any situation.

So, the central question of today's message is: Are we going to be peacemakers or troublemakers? Which one are you? I'd like to form this message around three choices. **The first is this: we can encourage or we can discourage.** It's as simple as that. Are you an encourager or are you a discourager? I love the Psalms. Psalm 39:1 King David cries out, "I will bridle my mouth." He says that to God, "I will bridle my mouth." And you can even sense in that psalm that David is struggling with keeping his mouth shut because he knows he needs to keep his mouth shut.

Whenever I read that particular psalm and that particular verse, it always reminds me of the advice my mother gave me growing up. She would say, "Charley, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Unfortunately, many folks follow another version of that advice, "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit next to me!"

But if there's a piece of advice that many of us need to follow it is to bridle our mouths. And this not only applies to the words we say but also to the words we post on social media. Are we bridling our Facebook posts? Do we think twice before we post things that discourage and tear down? Are we going to bridle our mouths? I'll be honest with you. The world has had enough of those who tear down. The world has had enough of critics. I don't know if you've noticed, but people are crying out to be encouraged to be built up, to be affirmed.

I think criticism is overrated. Oftentimes, criticism is couched in very righteous ways. But let me ask you this, are you ever excited or feel good about yourself when someone comes up to you and says, "You mind if I offer you some constructive criticism?" How do you feel when people do that? Now, I'm not saying there's not a time to be objective and evaluate, but generally speaking, people who say that to you and say, "I want to

offer you some constructive criticism," typically they're trying to tear down. They're not trying to build up.

So, what have you chosen lately? Are you an encourager or a discourager? Are you doing God's work or the devil's work? The interesting thing is many people have it backwards. There are many people in the church unfortunately who feel like they've been divinely appointed to criticize, to tear down, to discourage, and they do it rather righteously, and they think that God has appointed them in that situation to bring all kinds of criticism and negativity into a person's life. It's very sad.

James Moore talks about a situation that many preachers can relate to when he was a young pastor and he moved into a new church. He did this during the time when pastors lived in parsonages. We don't have many of those now. There are a few remaining, but most pastors have housing allowances. But back then Moore was moving his family into a parsonage into a new church, and they moved in about noon and they sat down at the dining room table to eat their first lunch in the home they just moved into when there was a knock on the door about 12:15pm. And who was it?

Well, it was a lady from the church who had brought over a casserole, but after she put that casserole down, she sat down with Moore and his family and she began to talk about his predecessor and all the things he did wrong. She criticized him for doing this. She criticized him for doing that. She went on and on and on and told James he needed to fix these things. And, of course, James tried his best to listen patiently and nodded his head, but he confessed and said, as she was talking, "I was thinking two particular things."

The first is she is saying more about herself than she is about my predecessor. And the second was: "You know what? There's going to come a day when I have to leave this church and I guarantee you this. She's going to come to this very house when my successor is here and say the exact same things about me."

Isn't it very sad how people believe they have been appointed to criticize, to tear down. And I have to tell you, as a pastor, the majority of people in churches have been absolutely wonderful. But I have come across some toxic people in every church I have served who feel they're in God's side when they create quarrels and division instead of unity.

There is a wonderful book by Laura Huxley entitled, *You Are Not The Target*. And she says, "If you're fortunate in life, you'll discover three particular things make three great discoveries. The first is this, you can

make people feel better or you can make them feel worse. The second is, it's much more satisfying to make people feel better. The third, when we make people feel better, generally we feel better."

Are you an encourager or a discourager? We can either encourage or discourage, but here's another choice we have: **We can heal or we can hate**. I'll tell you one thing, there is nothing more of a spiritual cancer than resentment and hate. Someone once said that hating and resenting a person is like drinking poison, expecting that other person to die. There is nothing more destructive. It can make us spiritually ill and physically ill.

Paul Turner once wrote about a particular person in one of his books that was suffering from anemia. She was terribly anemic and the doctors were at their wits end trying their best to figure out what was wrong with her, and they couldn't help her. They tried vitamins and they tried diets and they tried medicine. They tried everything they knew and she couldn't be helped. And she was in a bad state. So they said, "You know what? We're going to have to check you into the hospital."

Well, there came the day when she had to go into the hospital. Of course, they checked her blood and lo and behold, when they checked her blood, she was perfectly healthy. She was perfectly fine, and the doctors were baffled. So they approached her and they said, "Has anything new happened to you? Have you done anything different since our last visit?" And she thought for a second and said, "Yeah. When I knew I was so sick and knew I had to go to the hospital I called my brother who I have been estranged for my brother for many, many years. I hadn't talked to him in a long time, but I told him I was sick and I was going to the hospital and he came over to my house and we had a nice talk and I forgave him."

Isn't that something? Her resentment had made her physically ill, but once she let go of that hate, and once she let go of that resentment, she became well, she was healed. In fact, so much so that letting it go changed the components of her blood.

What do you choose? Are you going to heal or you going to hate? But here's another choice we have, and this hits close to home for many of us, perhaps. **We can be kind or we can be cruel**. Ephesians 4:32 says it quite plainly, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

You see, we're called to reflect the kindness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That great commandment is

simple. You shall love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, "The world will know your disciples by your love for one another." The truth is we can quote scripture chapter in verse, we can preach like Peter and pray like Paul, we can be experts in church history. We can know theology better than our professors. We can know scripture better than our biblical professors, but it's only when we show kindness, the kindness of Christ, that this world truly sees the power of our faith. We can be kind or we can be cruel.

The sad truth is some never learned this lesson about the importance of kindness. Maslow has this quote, I don't know if you've heard it before, but he says, "If your only tool is a hammer, you tend to see everything as a nail." You know someone like that? They think their only tool is a hammer, and they go smashing through people and they go smashing through issues, tearing up everything. And I am not only speaking of the physical. I am talking about the words we say. The old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That is the biggest lie that was ever said. Words cut. Words damage. Words can be destructive.

I'm sure that for many of you there are still words that were said to you in your past that haunt you maybe in your childhood, and you're still trying to live those words down. You're still trying to forget those words that were said to you. And I can think of words said to me by people I looked up to or by particular figures of my life, and those words just cut me. There have been so many people who've come into my office as a pastor who have sought counseling from me, who have been literally destroyed by those in their life who thought their only tool was a hammer and they hammered and they smashed them with awful words and criticism.

In fact, I remember a particular lady about in her thirties that I spoke to in another church who was really struggling with an eating disorder. And as we began to uncover her past and the reasons why she was struggling so much, well, the truth emerged. When she was a child she was rather chubby, and her classmates would tease her relentlessly and they would call her Jaws. And they would hum the Jaws theme as she came around. And she never got over that. So much so that in her thirties, she was still struggling with an eating disorder. It's sad when people think their only tool is a hammer.

We have another tool, a better tool, a more effective tool. And that is kindness. Your kindness may be the

only sermon that people hear. Never underestimate the power of kindness.

Vic Pentz, Senior Pastor at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, tells an unforgettable story of how one man's simple gesture of encouragement saved the life of his depressed colleague. One of Pentz's friends is a pastor in Seattle near Microsoft headquarters. He tells how a manager at Microsoft decided to live out his faith at work. The strategy he decided on was that instead of emailing and texting people who sat just 10 feet away from him, he would actually get up and go speak with them, you know, like they mattered!

A few weeks after he started doing this one of his employees came into his office and gave him a brand new version of a computer gaming system, Xbox Live. The manager said, "Where did you get the money to buy this?" because he knew what he was paying the guy, and it wasn't that much. The employee said, "Well, I sold my gun." The employee continued, "You see six months ago my mother died and I was depressed. Then I started working here thinking it would help, but nobody ever talked to me except on email. So I looked up 'coping with dead mother' on the internet but what I found instead were suicide chat rooms. So I went out and I bought a gun and I have been practicing ever since. Every night I put the gun to my head with Kurt Cobain music playing in the background. And for the last month the safety has been off. And I knew that the only way you would ever know that I died would be if payroll notified you."

He continued and said, "But then last week you freaked me out. You came to my desk and you put your arm around me and you told me I was funny even over email, which is hard to do. And you told me I always get my projects done on time which helps you to sleep better at night. So I went home and sold my gun and I bought you this. Because for the last few months you have been complaining how much you want Xbox Live, but that your financial advisor, a.k.a. your wife, won't let you have it. So I bought this for you. So for my life, here, this is yours."

Someone once said, "Be kind to everyone because everyone is fighting some kind of battle." We can be kind or we can be cruel. And as you have that picture of kindness in your mind, I want you to think of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave us the ultimate example of kindness. You see, we so easily write people off. We so easily can criticize others. We so easily can walk away from another person. But Jesus, he never

relinquished his love from anyone. In fact, even on the cross, he was trying to take care of his mother and he was forgiving a thief next to him.

The best tribute we can give to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is to carry on his torch of love and kindness in this world – a torch of light in this dark world. And we have to stop waiting for other people to do this because if the church can't respond in the midst of these days with light and love and kindness, who else will? We can encourage or discourage? We can heal or we can hate. We can be kind or we can be cruel. The choice is yours.



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org