

## February 9: Bullying (1 Samuel 1:1-16) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our yearlong series, where we’re exploring passages from all parts of our Bible related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Our desire is that as we walk this path and listen for God’s voice together, we might continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

This month, we’ve entered a miniseries focused on social media and its effects on our souls. Some of our topics are about how social media itself affects us, while others, like today’s topic of bullying, are issues that are intensified and exacerbated by social media. So no matter how much time you personally spend in cyberspace, you’re invited to listen with an openness to how God is speaking to you and calling you to respond.

Before we begin, please take a deep breath with me and join me in prayer.

*Oh, God – this world is full of bullying, and I think we might all know what it feels like to be targeted and shamed and squashed. As we explore Hannah’s story today, may we also be assured that you know and care about our own story, and may we hear your words of affirmation and love and emboldenment spoken over us. In your name, amen.*

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Bullying – how many of you, when you hear that word, are immediately transported back to a painful memory? I think it’s likely that every single one of us, when we look back carefully enough, has a bullying-related memory – we’ve either been bullied, we’ve participated in bullying, or we’ve been bystanders – perhaps all three. Bullying – particularly if we are the victim – has a tremendous potential to shape and form the kind of person we become.

Let me define bullying before I go on. Bullying is aggressive, unwanted, intentional, and repeated behavior, in which one person or a group of people causes injury or discomfort to another. Bullying always involves an imbalance of power, where the bully is asserting either real or perceived or desired power over the person being bullied, putting them “in their place”. Bullying can be physical – pushing, hitting, kicking, and destroying property; it can be verbal – name-calling, teasing; it can be social – spreading rumors, leaving somebody out of a group, ganging up on them; and, increasingly, it can take place in cyberspace, using the power and reach of social media to target and shame somebody 24/7, no matter where they are. Brené Brown defines shame as “the intensely personal feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed

and therefore unworthy of love and belonging,”<sup>1</sup> and as I’ve talked to people who were bullied and heard stories and read research, I’ve become convinced that the experience of shame is intrinsic to bullying – to bully someone is to attack their sense of self-worth and agency, and because of this, the effects of bullying can be deep and lasting. In her book, *Bullying Scars*, Ellen deLara writes, “Being bullied carries a lifelong message. That message is: ‘You are inadequate, you are ‘less than’ everyone else’” – and not only do children who are bullied grow up with a diminished sense of self,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the adults in her research study “reported experiencing one of more negative consequences in their adult lives as a result of childhood bullying. These included a lack of trust in relationships, difficulty making or maintaining friendships, poor self-image, generalized feelings of helplessness, and anxiety, or depression.”<sup>2</sup>

When I began preparing this sermon, I believed that I had never been personally bullied, so I focused on interrogating my husband, who was relentlessly bullied in high school, to understand how that experience impacted and shaped him. It was only in the last two weeks that memories from my own fifth grade year in Brunswick, GA, hit me – how a small group of students targeted me socially with a smear campaign. At one point, they stood up in class to accuse and publicly shame me, and were joined by the majority of my class, who one-by-one added made-up accusations to the pile-on as the teacher listened. I remember my intense shame and how it threatened to annihilate me right then and there as I sat at my desk; I can still feel my efforts to hold it together, the pressure in my throat as I swallowed back the tears and panic; and the way I never told my parents about what happened because my shame was so intense. Part of me was afraid that my parents might believe the lies that were told about me; that they might begin to see me as the bad and disgusting person my bullies said I was.

As I resurrected those memories, I also recalled that my parents took me to the doctor during that same 5<sup>th</sup> grade year because I was so listless and unlike myself. The doctor never asked me about bullying, I didn’t volunteer information, and he ended up prescribing more energy-rich foods and suggesting that maybe I was bored at school. Our family moved at the end of that year, I got to start over in a much healthier school, and I buried those memories pretty successfully – this is the first I’ve ever talked of them, even to my family. The shame of that year ran deep, and I can still feel it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/>

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Walser deLara, *Bullying Scars: The Impact on Adult Life and Relationships*, p.14.

Our story today is about bullying and shame and transformation. As we dive into it and work our way through, I want to not only use it as a window to better understand bullying in our own context; but I also want to invite it to speak hope and encouragement, particularly to those of us who carry the shame and pain of being bullied.

Today's story begins in ancient Israel in the time of the Judges – the exact same setting as the story of the Levite and his concubine that I preached about in my last sermon about abuse – when was no king in Israel, and everybody was doing what was right in their own eyes. In the first few verses, we are introduced to a man named Elkanah and his two wives: Hannah and Penninah. Polygamy was commonplace and acceptable in ancient Israel; and although it's never condemned in the Bible, we also never see a happy polygamous marriage portrayed. And this particular marriage was no exception.

I can't emphasize enough how painful and shameful it would have been for Hannah, Elkanah's first wife, to be infertile. In ancient Near East cultures, child-bearing was seen as the primary purpose in life for a woman, her reason for existing; and to be unable to have a child was a curse and always the fault of the wife; her barrenness invited disgrace not just to her, but to her husband and extended family. It's very likely that the reason Elkanah took a second wife was because even though he loved Hannah, he "needed" children, and she was unable to produce.

In contrast to Hannah, Penninah was exceeding fertile and fruitful – verse 4 references "all her sons and daughters." This fertility would have given Penninah social status and moral power over Hannah, even though Hannah was the senior wife. And Penninah appears to have taken advantage of that power to make Hannah's life miserable – verse 6 says that Penninah, Hannah's "rival," "kept provoking her in order to irritate her," year after year. And during the family's annual visits to the Lord's tabernacle at Shiloh, Penninah would step up the cruelty, until Hannah "wept and would not eat." It's significant that Hannah's misery is portrayed not as a response to her infertility, but to the taunts and bullying of Penninah, who used Hannah's barrenness to shame and belittle her.

Let me pause right here to talk about how this ancient story is reflected in modern-day bullying. First, bullying within families is widespread – in one study of children between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, almost half of them reported

being bullied by a sibling. Second, the victims of bullying are almost always different in some way – they don't fit the norm where they are, and are seen as a kind of threat to the system – they need to be kept in their place. My husband was bullied as an Asian-appearing smart kid in a sea of white Midwestern highschoolers, while I was bullied as a quirky missionary kid from Bangladesh with a weird British/Midwestern/Southern accent who went to speech therapy. Anyone with a significant difference, whether it's ethnicity, appearance, race, sexuality, gender, or neurodivergence, is vulnerable to bullying. And as a barren woman who was still loved and honored by her husband, Hannah was an obvious target.

And before we condemn Penninah for using her power to make Hannah miserable, let's consider her situation. She probably didn't have any choice about being Elkanah's second wife, and despite that fact that she did everything a wife should do and gave Elkanah lots of children, he continued to love and preference Hannah. It must have seemed to Penninah that she could never do or be enough, and that had to hurt. And like Penninah, many modern-day bullies come from homes in which there's a lack of love and attention, and a significant percentage of bullies have experienced abuse or have been bullied themselves. Understanding this doesn't excuse their cruelty, but it does humanize them.

During annual trips to the temple, Hannah's weeping and refusal to eat clued her husband in to the fact that something was wrong. However, his response left much to be desired. Instead of addressing the bullying in his own home, validating Hannah's pain, or reassuring Hannah of her core worth, he chided her for her misery and then turned the focus to himself. "Hannah, why are you weeping?" he asked in verse 8. "Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Not surprisingly, this tone-deaf response didn't soothe Hannah's pain. And many times, when children who are bullied tell adults what's going on, the adults' responses are unhelpful; sometimes they even increase the child's pain or expose them to worse bullying. Responses that are particularly hurtful include ignoring or minimizing the pain of the situation or the bullying; or suggesting that a victim is to blame in some way, because of who they are or what they've done.

So Elkanah failed to respond well to Hannah, and in deep anguish she went to the Lord's house. And it was there that she encountered the priest Eli, who confronted her with yet another unhelpful response to her pain. He saw her praying with her mouth moving but no sound, and he assumed that she was inebriated – "How long are you going to stay drunk?" he scolded her. "Put away your wine."

Needless to say, this was a terrible pastoral response to a woman in deep anguish, and even though Eli's accusation wasn't true, it could easily have crushed Hannah under an even greater weight of shame. But here's where I believe the story turns. Because suddenly, this bullied woman who had been judged and taunted and minimized found her voice and her agency: she knew who she was and spoke it out with clarity – "Not so, my lord", she retorted to Eli. "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman" (1:15-16). In the NRSV translation, Hannah says, "Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman." And I wonder – how many times had Penninah told Hannah that she was a worthless woman for failing to fulfill the primary vocation of womanhood, to give her husband children? How many times had Penninah implied that Hannah must be a wicked woman, cursed with barrenness because she was fundamentally flawed or evil? How deeply had Hannah internalized that belief in her own unworthiness? And what changed – how did she suddenly find the courage and clarity to push back with truth and claim her own worth and voice, to take back a measure of power that had been taken from her?

I believe that the turning point came right before Eli's accusation, when Hannah turned to the LORD of Israel and poured out her heart. Even before she asked God for a child, she made these requests: "O LORD of hosts, look on the misery of your servant, and remember me." (1:11). And in that space and at that moment, I believe that those requests were immediately answered. Up to this point, nobody had actually *seen* Hannah in all of her personhood and shame and pain – Elkanah hadn't seen her, Eli didn't see her, Penninah definitely didn't. But *El-Roi* – the God who sees, named by the enslaved woman, Hagar, in the midst of her own distress – *El-Roi* saw Hannah, and Hannah knew that the Lord of hosts knew her and remembered her – not as a worthless or wicked woman, but as a daughter fully worthy of love and respect.

Verse 18 says that when Hannah left the Lord's house and went back to her quarters, she "ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer." What had changed? Hannah wasn't yet pregnant – she still carried the same societal stigma of barrenness. And Hannah's bully hadn't changed – Penninah almost certainly continued to provoke and taunt her. What had changed was the way that Hannah saw herself – no longer as a powerless and worthless woman, but as someone who was seen and remembered by God, who had used her voice and agency to speak truth back to a priest in authority, receiving his affirmation and blessing in return.

I read quite a bit about bullying in preparation for this sermon – I read the recommended book from the soul care library, and I read a variety of websites and articles online. And here's what I learned – bullying is complicated, because it's not just about the person who bullies and the person being bullied, but it's about a whole system that is unjust and broken. When we are bullied, or when we hear about our children or people we care for being bullied, there are things we can and should do. We can let schools know; we can contact parents; we can add protections online; and sometimes we can remove somebody from a problem setting – it definitely made a difference for me to move on from Brunswick, GA to a different environment. But even when we do everything right, we can't singlehandedly change people in power who are bullies, and we can't always remove a victim from a broken system that allows and even encourages bullying.

But we *can* always come to a God who sees us, who validates our suffering, who affirms our innate worth and value, and who unfailingly stands on the side of the oppressed and bullied. Like Hannah, we can release our shame and misery and even our anger to the God who hears, and we can speak the truth of who we are. And we can participate in the work of this God of justice when we see the pain of those who are bullied, listen to their stories, help them see themselves as worthy of respect, and coach them to reclaim their own voice and agency, even in systems that continue to be broken and unjust.

Jesus lived and taught in a context in which powerful Roman soldiers bullied and taunted the people they occupied, and in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his listeners about how to confront bullying and reclaim their agency and self-worth in a broken system: "Do not resist an evil person," he said. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." In the culture of Jesus' time, being right-handed was the social norm, so slapping

somebody's *right* cheek as they faced you meant giving a back-handed slap: Jesus' Jewish listeners would have recognized this kind of slap as a humiliating social insult, designed to publicly demean and shame somebody and assert power over them. If a Roman overlord wanted to treat you like that, you had no power to stop them.

But if you were the victim of a back-handed slap to the right cheek and – instead of slinking away in shame, you deliberately looked your tormentor in the eye and turned your left cheek to them – you were taking control over the encounter, inviting them to slap you with an open hand, the kind of slap given to an equal, not an inferior. By intentionally turning the other cheek, you communicated to your tormentor that although they might be able to physically hurt you, they were powerless to steal your dignity or your innate self-worth – because those were given to you by God, not by any human. Turning the other cheek wasn't passive capitulation to abuse: it was a courageous act of non-violent resistance to bullies who seemed to hold all of the power. And although our context today is different than ancient Rome, there are numerous creative ways we can, like Hannah and like Jesus, use our words and actions to claim our worth, personhood, voice, and agency in the face of bullying.

Here's a statistic that is hopeful and lifegiving: In her research on hundreds of adults who were bullied as children, Ellen deLara found that almost half of them (47%) reported what they considered to be a positive impact from the bullying. They said that even though being bullied was terrible and caused lifelong wounds and difficulties, it also made them "stronger," "more resilient," "more independent" and "more confident", as well as increasing their sense of empathy and compassion towards others. "The ability to mature into a true sense of self-acceptance," deLara writes, "may be seen as a fully positive outcome for some people who sustain bullying and harassment as kids."<sup>3</sup>

As the story of Hannah continues to unfold in 1 Samuel, you can see this increasing confidence in her own life: God did bless her with a son, and she made her own independent decisions about when and how to dedicate him back to God. When she brought Samuel back to God's house, she broke into an incredible, prophetic song about a world where "the bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength", where "those who

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen de Lara, *Bullying Scars*, p.177, 194.

were hungry are hungry no more,” and where God “raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (1 Samuel 2:4,5, 8). Hundreds of years later, Hannah’s song would be revised and re-voiced by a young woman named Mary with a different kind of miraculous pregnancy, whose son would grow up to inaugurate the upside-down kingdom of justice and restoration that these two women foresaw – and who would do that through non-violent, loving resistance in the face of bullying and oppression.

Bullying is evil, and on its own, there’s nothing good or redemptive about it. But one of my bedrock beliefs is that God is consistently in the business of taking what was meant for evil and turning it into good. And I wholeheartedly believe that God isn’t only able to heal the deep wounds that bullying inflicts on us, but that God uniquely calls and empowers those who have experienced the injustice of bullying to be central to the work of healing and transformation in our world. And so, if you have been bullied, or you are being bullied, I invite you to talk about it, to share your story like I did today, to bring any shame you still carry into the light and defiantly speak truth to it, like Hannah did: “Do not call me a worthless person.” And as we do this together, may we hear and believe God’s voice of affirmation and love, and may we be emboldened to join in the difficult but powerful work of living out that love and justice in the face of the world’s bullies, who still hold power: because we know who we are, and like Hannah and Mary, we know how the story will end. Amen.