

*A Cup of Cold Water*

You might be a redneck if: You think the stock market has a fence around it. Your coffee table used to be a telephone cable spool. Your house has more miles on it than your car.

Why did you laugh? (Or why did you want to laugh but stifled it?) The term redneck refers to white southern Americans. Why is it socially acceptable to laugh at southerners when it's not politically correct to laugh at anyone else? If I told similar jokes about other racial, ethnic, or gender minorities the phones lines to the bishop would be lighting up saying, "Pastor Ash is a racist, sexist bigot." The fact is that we are all prejudice and bigoted, each in our own ways, although we often think we're not. No one is immune to harboring prejudices, or being the victim of prejudice. It is a consequence of original sin.

Last week our Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly considered and adopted a resolution regarding bullying. Bullying is especially prevalent and noticeable in schools among young people, but we know that it takes place at all ages and in all places: not only among the young but also among the middle aged and elderly, and in communities, the workplace, and even churches. Do you know what the two top reasons are that young people are bullied in school? Body size and disabilities are the two most common causes for bullying. Children that are too heavy, or too skinny, or too short, or too tall, or those with learning disabilities, or with physical disabilities, or illnesses or deformities are the most likely to be picked on, beaten, verbally abused, excluded from groups and things like that.

But you probably knew that, didn't you? You knew that because it probably happened to you. At some point you were picked on, or maybe you bullied or discriminate against someone else. No, no, everyone here was the perfect height and weight, was class valedictorian, and the head cheerleader or the captain of the football team, and you treated

everyone equally with love and respect, right? I'll confess that I was a victim of bullying. I was obese my whole life and I suffered for it. And I will confess that in those instances when I could, I turned the tables on those I could. How quickly the oppressed can become the oppressor -- yet another consequence of sin.

Sometimes I wonder about some of the kids I went to high school with. There was this girl who wore clothes that were horribly out of style, had poor personal hygiene, and never talked to anybody. What ever became of her? There was this guy who wore military type clothing, read graphically violent books and magazines, and always talked about killing teachers and students. He'd be removed from a school today, but that was decades before Columbine. What ever happened to him? How different their teenage lives might have been if some of the cool kids just would have talked to them every now and then, maybe gone out of their way to make them feel liked and wanted.

I also think about some of the kids who were the prime bullies. You don't realize it when you are young, but a lot of these kids came from alcoholic homes, or physically abusive homes, or homes where there was extreme poverty. Even some of the rich kids who were bullies lived in homes where they lacked no material thing, but they grew up without love, or parental involvement, or a healthy sense of self worth or self-esteem, beyond building up a false sense of self-esteem by what they possessed and how bad they could make others feel. I doubt any of them grew up in what we would consider a proper Christian home. I'm not making excuses for them; I'm just trying to show how convoluted and complicated sin and its effects can be. A mistreated kid bullies another child, who bullies someone else, and the cycle goes on.

Jesus tells us "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." Let's unpack that statement a bit. When Jesus refers to the "little ones," he's not just talking about

children. The “little ones” include everyone who is vulnerable or defenseless, those susceptible to bullying and oppression. Sometimes Jesus would use the term “widows and orphans” to name that group. From what Jesus says in other places in scripture, we can logically expand the “cup of cold water” concept to include not just refreshment to the thirsty but food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and other types of appropriate service to those in need, like consolation to the bullied.

Notice how Jesus specifies that this is to be done “in the name of a disciple.” It seems to me that often today a lot service and missionary work are done almost anonymously. We must never lose sight of the motivation we have to help others, namely, because Jesus tells us too. Helping others is what followers of Jesus do and we do it not just because it’s a nice thing to do, we do it because it a sign of Jesus’ coming kingdom. We help others in this life to help guide them to eternal life. Our service to others is a concrete expression of Jesus’ love for them. Whatever we do good for others, we should not be ashamed to do it publicly and openly as Jesus’ disciples and for His sake, to make His name and glory known.

Why might we be afraid or embarrassed to name the name of Jesus? It is because Christians are a most bullied and discriminated against group today. The instances of systematic and habitual persecution and harassment of Christians around the world is well documented. In many places to name your self as a Christian is to invite discrimination and violence upon yourself. We know about how Christians are imprisoned and tortured and killed in hostile nations worldwide. As Christians blessed to live in a place where we have religious freedom and resources, it is our duty and our joy to serve those in the persecuted church. We are called to offer the widows and orphans of Christian martyrs that cup of cold water and more, as disciples of Christ.

Discrimination against Christians in our country may be less overt and violent, but certainly not absent or unreal. How often do you discuss your church or your faith at work or at school? You can talk about music and TV and politics even, but mention Jesus and people get uncomfortable. They might not want a “Jesus Freak” in their company. In 1993, a Washington Post reporter described Christians as “poor, uneducated and easy to command,” and that epithet has stuck. A survey not too long found that the adjective most associated with the word *Christian* was *intolerant*. If a politician talks about moral values, he or she is immediately characterized by the media as pandering to Christians. Is that right? Is that fair? Where is the real intolerance and bigotry there?

Jesus tells us to give a cup of cold water to a little one. For you that might mean being nice to the most unpopular kid at school. That might mean talking to the most boring person at work. Just think what a little kindness and compassion could do for those people. If they only knew how much God loves them, that could make all the difference in the world to them. It could literally save someone’s life. And you might be the person God has chosen to give that person His message of love and salvation. The love of Christ can end bullying better than any program, no matter how well designed or well intentioned, ever could.

Giving that cup of cold water could also mean letting go of the anger and hurt you suffered at the hands of those who bullied you. After all, they have their own problems, and theirs might be even worse than yours. Whether they know it or not, they need forgiveness. They need the healing only Christ can give. Forgiveness would do you a world of good too. Imagine the weight off your shoulders if you could just let go of the sins against you.

At the very least that cup of cold water means praying for those persecuted and imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. And I ask you, are you ready to be an outcast for Jesus’ sake? We know that we are saved by God’s grace and not what we do. Salvation is not a reward,

but God may reward our good deeds in this life or the next as he sees fit. Paul discusses sanctification in the second lesson today, and that is what we call Christian living aided by the Holy Spirit. We know that once we are touched by the grace of God, we cannot help but help others. If we associate with those who suffer bigotry and prejudice, we will suffer it along with them. If we take up for the vulnerable, we make ourselves vulnerable. That is not easy to do, at any time or place, but this is the cup of cold water Jesus wants and rewards from us, his disciples. Go on, speak the name of Jesus and share a cup of cold water today. Amen.