

A School Bus Tale – Mark 7:31-37

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Doug Pagitt is a pastor of a congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota, called “Solomon’s Porch.” In his book, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, Pagitt tells of what he experienced while riding the school bus at the beginning of his first year in junior high. Maybe some of you have memories of riding the school bus in junior high. If so, you may be able to relate to this story.

It was the ultimate in junior high bus abuse. I was starting sixth grade, which meant a new school. It also meant sharing the yellow tub of torture with ninth graders. I didn’t know all the subtleties of bus politics, but I knew enough not to sit in the back—that was the domain of the ninth graders. And I knew enough not to claim a front seat—that was the place for kids who wanted to talk to the bus driver or had to keep track of their band instruments.

On the first day of school, I was scared. One of the drawbacks of being a big kid—in sixth grade I was six feet tall and weighed 160 pounds—was that everyone assumed I could keep up with the older kids. I was pretty good at faking cool, but deep inside I knew those ninth graders were way out of my league. So I took my place just in front of the “love seat,” so dubbed because it was the seat above the wheel well, and anyone sitting there was teased for being “in love” with the other person in the seat. At least that had been the story on the elementary school bus. But that was when the bus was innocent, when the worst thing we could think to do was tie a GI Joe to the back of the bus so it would trail behind us, tormenting the neighborhood dogs along the way.

The back of the bus was ruled by the Kane boys. They were a tough lot. Earlier that summer I’d seen Davey Kane take a header off his bike onto a road where a crew had just laid a topcoat of fresh gravel. Rocks embedded in his face and he barely cried. I was almost in tears just looking at him. That was one tough kid.

But he wasn’t the mean one. The mean one was Kevin.

It took only three stops that first morning for Kevin to hit his stride. As the door opened, I heard Kevin say, "Get ready." I looked around, trying to figure out what he was preparing for. A girl named Didi walked on to the bus. And it started.

"Didi Dorf _____ . Didi Dorf _____ . Didi Dorf _____ ." (You can fill in the blanks; they were not appropriate words.)

The girl turned down the aisle, eyes on the rubber rug, shoulders hunched, as though by disappearing into herself she could make them stop. She sank into the second seat as the boys in the back repeated their chant. It must have gone on for less than a minute, but it felt like a lifetime.

I didn't know her, and I had no idea what she had done to become the recipient of such cruelty. From her appearance it looked like she had a pretty tough life—she often came to the bus looking disheveled and on one occasion showed up still in her pajamas. I didn't know if Dorf was her full last name or a shortened mocking of it. But it didn't matter. The barbs were headed straight for her, and she couldn't do anything to stop them.

This happened every day during the first week. And each day more people joined in—the boys and the girls, the older kids and the younger kids. I wasn't one of them, but that's not necessarily something to be proud of. It wasn't an act of bravery on my part to slide down in my seat and hope Kevin never set his sights on me. It wasn't enough to resist the crowd; Didi needed someone to protect her from their violence. But as a twelve-year-old, I didn't have it in me to throw myself between the abuser and his victim.

Finally on Friday, just as it seemed like the entire bus was about to take part in this verbal abuse choir, the bus driver stopped the bus, stood up, and turned around. "Stop it!" he scolded. "Why do you keep saying that to this poor girl?"

Kevin, in an act befitting his brash rudeness, replied without missing a beat, "Because she does _____ ."

The driver turned to Didi and bent down to say something to her. I like to believe he was telling her that they were wrong. That she didn't _____. That she was valuable and important. That she was beautiful and

wonderful and had world-changing potential because she was made in the very image of God. I like to believe he protected her with the truth.

The driver must have done something more than that, because Kevin wasn't on the bus for a week, and when he returned, there was no more chanting. I don't know what became of Didi Dorf, but wherever she is, I hope she's experienced enough love to override Kevin's taunts. As for Kevin, I hope he's experienced enough love to find forgiveness for the pain he caused a young girl.

As Doug Pagitt says, "This is a story that doesn't need explaining. No one hears it and wonders why Kevin was in the wrong. No one believes Didi did what Kevin repeatedly proclaimed she did. None of us believe she deserved to be treated this way. As Christians, we believe that Didi is a precious child of God who is 'fearfully and wonderfully made.'"

There is so much pain in this story. There is the pain of the words Kevin used on that first day and didn't shy away from using each of those remaining days that week. There is the pain of the other students on that bus joining in on the chants, adding to the chorus of isolation and humiliation Didi must have felt. There is the pain of the remaining students on the bus like the author who couldn't muster the strength to stand up to the older kids and defend the poor girl.

It's a story of cruelty and an example of how poorly we human beings can treat each other.

That kind of cruelty exists beyond school buses, of course. And most often in more subtle kinds of ways. It happens face-to-face with victims, but far more so behind their backs. Young people on either side of middle school are culprits, but adults aren't immune either. And make no mistake, it happens everywhere—in schools, on the streets, in workplaces, and even in the church.

The writer of Proverbs says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches." And clearly, we do not choose good names for ourselves when we engage in behavior that belittles or disrespects

those in our midst—whether we're at work, on the school bus, or in the house of the Lord.

Noble institutions such as schools and churches should be at least a step above the norm when it comes to how we treat each other with dignity. And yet, while we all fall short of the glory of God, it is disappointing to God when we don't do better.

O Lord, forgive us.

There is hope, however, for the victims of such abuse, wherever they may be. And shining through the darkness in this story of Didi on the school bus is one bright light. It's the one character who is noble and gives hope where seemingly no hope could be found. It's the bus driver, who even though he regrettably let this go on for a full week, finally intervened. He forcefully told the students to stop what they were doing and kicked Kevin off the bus. Justice was finally served.

But the driver did one other thing, too. He bent down and talked quietly to Didi. Amid the chaos, the driver validates her as a child of God. He takes time to personally confirm what God already knows and what she needed to be reminded of. Nobody else heard his words, but they represented the force of dignity and compassion that had been sorely missed on that bus those prior mornings.

How many of us have been graced in our lives with the personal attention similar to that of this man? Hopefully it wasn't amid similar cruelty, but we might remember a time when somebody pulled us aside, away from the crowd, and presented us with an encouraging word, a piece of insight, or a helpful instruction that served to heal a dangerously-fragile spirit.

More than what was said, just the presence of that person—an adult while we were a kid or even a contemporary—helped us out. It was somebody reaching out to us and only to us in that moment that reinforced our worth.

In the healing story from Mark today, Jesus pulls this deaf man out of the crowd. He takes him to a private place and heals him. Now, his desire to do this privately may have been as much about

Jesus wanting to keep his healing ability quiet as it was anything else (he was concerned about word getting out to the Roman authorities). But for this man who had suffered from hearing loss and a speech impediment for quite a long time, imagine being pulled aside and given the personal attention that nobody else had ever given him. It is no wonder his spirit soared and that he joined the crowd in zealously proclaiming what Jesus had done.

As much as God is concerned about the larger world, as much as God is omnipotent and omnipresent, as much as God is out there and up there, Jesus reminds us today that he is very much right here. For each of us, Christ is calling us out of the crowd and personally attending to our needs. He's bending over like that bus driver did with that little girl and offering us words of comfort and hope and healing.

Despite our sinfulness as the church, the church is one body by which Christ offers this personal attention. Through the people sitting next to us in worship, through the teacher in the Sunday School, through choir member who sings next to us, through the person who works alongside us in the church kitchen, through the reluctant disciple that joins us in our skepticism at times, Christ is assessing our hearts and looking us in the eye and telling us how much he loves us and how much we're valued.

For that young girl on the bus, that bus driver was her only consolation in that moment of torment. Christ acted through him. And Christ acts through people we meet in a private moment perhaps and provides the blessed assurance that we are not forsaken.

For the mistreated and the put-down, for the ridiculer and gossiper, Christ is all the same: the judge quick to call out our misbehavior and the one who comes to our aid in our greatest moment of isolation and despair.

Thanks be to God.