

Message: Overcoming Fear**[[Watch YouTube video of Jonah Mowry](#)]¹**

Jonah’s message is a powerful and timely reminder as school begins for our children and others’ children in our community. Bullying is a well-known problem today. If you Google the word “bully”, you’ll get more than 24 million results. It’s THE predominant problem for children and young adults today.

Bullying happens to children of all ages in schools. It happens to adults in the workplace. Bullying happens on the roadways. It happens at home, at sporting events, in locker rooms, at the supermarket and in parking lots. Bullying happens to seniors and those in retirement homes. Approximately 80% of teens are bullied in some form while in school, on the way to or from school or school activities.

Bullying isn’t just physical. It’s verbal, social and, more and more, it’s online. Online bullying, or cyberbullying, is called trolling. The Google definition is “*to make a deliberately offensive or provocative online posting with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response from them.*” Bullying is an equal opportunity form of oppression: women and men participate. Bullying has been linked to high school and college student suicides nationwide. It’s been linked with gun violence like the Columbine High School and other workplace tragedies.

Bullying is a problem we all can address, whether we’re students, parents, family or members of the community. It’s stressful for everyone involved, which means it’s harmful to the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health of us all. I changed my message today because of the pervasive nature of the problem. It’s a good example of the topic we’re addressing: fear.

I believe bullying is related to fear.

We can stop bullying. It’s as simple as stepping in when we see it happening. There are a couple of things to keep in mind when you do. First, those who bully others are afraid. Often, they have been bullied, abused or feel like they need to protect their position in a group. For

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdkNn3Ei-Lg>

example, the popular girl in school is often the most insecure. Second, more than 50% of the time, bullying stops within 10 seconds when others intervene. We aren't joining the fight. We're just stepping in and saying, “Hey, that's not right. Stop that and calm down.”

When we do that, we're following Jesus, who said, *“You're familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best - the sun to warm and the rain to nourish - to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that”* (The Message).

The only way to love your enemy is to overcome your fear.

Sounds good, but how do we do that? Fear makes us defensive. We want to fight or run away. We don't naturally think of peaceful responses. Those require spiritual strength.

Think about the last time you were really afraid. What did you do?

If we went around the room, I'll bet we'd find a range of responses. Some would be active, others would be more passive. Some would be anxious, others would be calm. Some would begin with prayer, others aren't sure what to pray or if God is really listening.

Let me assure you: God is listening. Paul teaches us, *“...the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. [God] does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. [The Spirit] knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our ... condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good”* (8:26-28, The Message).

The Spirit of the Lord is always with us. The myth is to be vulnerable is to be weak, so we deserve to be taken advantage of. That's not true!

The antidote to fear is truth. Truth sets us free. It begins within us. We have to admit that we're afraid. That's hard, because we're taught to "be strong." When I grew up, parents taught us "boys don't cry." Culture tells us to strike or shoot first and ask questions later. Action before truth makes no sense.

John taught, *“There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life - fear of death, fear of judgment - is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love - love and be loved”* (1 John 4:17-18, The Message).

Once we admit the truth to ourselves, the flood gates open. Now we can go to God with our fear. God loves us. God will listen and respond, comforting our hearts and minds, tending to our spirit. Even if we don't know the words to say, God hears. That's what it means to trust God.

Once we go to God, we're ready for the last step: tell others. We need to share the truth we're holding inside with others. Secrets have power over us. They bind us and prevent God's light from shining fully into all the corners of our heart. No matter what fear you are struggling with, God will give you the opportunity to share it with someone who cares. If you're being bullied, tell your parents, family or friends. Tell a teacher or principal if you're in school. Tell your boss, your bosses' boss or HR at work. Tell the organizers of an event or activity. And you can share it with me and your brothers and sisters here. This is a safe place. There is power in a community of faith and trust. It's the power of love. Trust God and follow the truth.

It takes time to learn how to trust God and overcome our fear.

Sarah Kelly told her story to Christianity Today. I'm sharing it.

“Sarah struggled with abusive relationships in high school and college, even while serving as the chaplain of her youth group. After a violent attack by her boyfriend Craig, she said, “I wanted to forget the last several hours. I wanted to forget my physical pain. Suck it up, I thought. It's your fault this happened, so you have to figure out how to get through this.”

She got to school, went straight to class and lived out the day like any other. She never talked to Craig again. And she didn't even consider telling anyone or pressing charges. The last thing Sarah wanted to do was let anybody at church know what happened. *‘Good Christians don't have flaws and weaknesses, she thought. So I need to pretend I don't either or my church won't accept me. If I don't have their approval, I don't have God's approval.’*

One afternoon Sarah was sitting on my living room floor writing. Before she knew it, she was crying and writing things she'd never admitted to herself, let alone anyone else. She could feel God telling her she was better than the life she was living. Sarah realized that only God's love gave her life meaning and worth - not anything she did or how she appeared to others. She discovered that no one in the church is perfect, so why pretend? And Sarah felt God telling her that looking like she had everything together wasn't bringing her closer to Jesus. Instead, she needed to be real with him, accept his love and let him work in her.

Sarah drew a straight line across the page. With tear-filled eyes, she pictured herself stepping over the line and she said aloud: *‘No more. I need to think more of myself than I now do because I know God thinks more of me than this.’*

That was the beginning of a more healthy relationship with God. For the first time, Sarah prayed that day about hating herself, about the abuse and about trying to be the perfect Christian. She was finally honest.

The next day, Sarah told her abusive boyfriend, *‘These things need to change. I am better than this.’* But nothing changed. God gave her the strength to break up with him.

Sarah was most worried about telling people at her church. She thought they'd judge her and assume she did something wrong. Sarah was scared about what would happen when they realized she wasn't Sarah the Perfect Christian but just Sarah, a messy and flawed believer.

Sarah shared her story with her pastor. Rather than asking, ‘How could you let this happen?’, her pastor cried with her and expressed sorrow for

the way she had had to live. Eventually, Sarah was able to share her story with other members of her congregation.

She was surprised.

Sarah said, ‘No one in my church reacted the way I thought they would. My church loved me, cried for me and stayed by my side. Unlike me, these people realized we all have messiness and Christ loves us no matter what. I realized I needed to always look to God first instead of impressing others. And I needed to quit pretending everything was OK all the time.

And that's what I've tried to do since then. My family and friends came alongside me and showered me with love and care. Each week, I talk to two pastors who've become my mentors. I also started seeing a professional counselor.’

The deepest issue Sarah had to address was her self-hatred. All her life she tried to find her worth in other people. But other humans can't give us worth - only God can. Sarah says, ‘I discovered through praying and reading [God's] Word that I am God's daughter. [God] created me and loves me. When I saw that, I realized I am worth much more than how these men treated me. I never deserved to be abused. It wasn't my fault.

I still have to fight every day to realize that I'm worth loving. But because I finally stopped hiding behind a mask of perfection, I'm now healing from the horrible things done to me. And I'll never let myself suffer abuse again. Why? Because there are finally people who know my struggles. Because God is by my side. And because I like who I am.’”²

In Philippians 4:7-9 Paul wrote, “*Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*” (The Message).

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ivf/hottopics/selfesteem/trapped-in-abuse-no-more.html?start=3>

Sarah found her way. She knows the journey isn't easy, but she isn't alone anymore. She's a good person. God is with her.

God loves you. You are a good person, worthy of love, respect and dignity. Admit your fears and share them with God and others. You'll be glad you did, for that's the way to a healthy life.

Let us pray...

Fill us with your Spirit, the spirit of love and truth. Show us how to pray, to seek truth and to find ourselves in you. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalm 15 (The Message)

GOD, who gets invited to dinner at your place?

How do we get on your guest list?

“Walk straight, act right, tell the truth. Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbor; despise the despicable. Keep your word even when it costs you, make an honest living, never take a bribe. You'll never get blacklisted if you live like this.”

Romans 8:26-31 (The Message)

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.