

One of the things that I mention often at funerals is the importance of the little things, namely the simple actions we do to build one another up. Because when we do that over the course of a lifetime, it's incredible the impact we can have on one another.

Sister Helen Mroska was a Franciscan nun. She entered eternal life in September of 2000, but shortly before her death she wrote about a lesson she taught her class in the small town of Morris, Minnesota about kindness and love for one another. In her words:

He was in the first third grade class I taught at Saint Mary's School in Morris, Minn. All 34 of my students were dear to me, but Mark Eklund was one in a million. Very neat in appearance, but had that happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful.

Mark talked incessantly. I had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was not acceptable. What impressed me so much, though was his sincere response every time I had to correct him for misbehaving – "Thank you for correcting me, Sister!" I didn't know what to

make of it at first, but before long I became accustomed to hearing it many times a day.

One morning my patience was growing thin when Mark talked once too often, and then I made a novice teacher's mistake. I looked at Mark and said, "If you say one more word, I am going to tape your mouth shut!" It wasn't ten seconds later when Chuck blurted out, "Mark is talking again." I hadn't asked any of the students to help me watch Mark, but since I had stated the punishment in front of the class, I had to act on it. I remember the scene as if it had occurred this morning. I walked to my desk, very deliberately opened my drawer and took out a roll of masking tape. Without saying a word, I proceeded to Mark's desk, tore off two pieces of tape and made a big X with them over his mouth. I then returned to the front of the room. As I glanced at Mark to see how he was doing, he winked at me. That did it! I started laughing. The class cheered as I walked back to Mark's desk, removed the tape, and shrugged my shoulders. His first words were, "Thank you for correcting me, Sister."

At the end of the year, I was asked to teach junior-high math. The years flew by, and before I knew it Mark was in my classroom again. He was

more handsome than ever and just as polite. Since he had to listen carefully to my instruction in the “new math,” he did not talk as much in ninth grade as he had in third. One Friday, things just didn’t feel right. We had worked hard on a new concept all week, and I sensed that the students were frowning, frustrated with themselves and edgy with one another. I had to stop this crankiness before it got out of hand. So I asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then I told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed me the papers. Charlie smiled. Mark said, “Thank you for teaching me, Sister. Have a good weekend.” That Saturday, I wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and I listed what everyone else had said about that individual.

On Monday I gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. Really?” I heard whispered. “I never knew that meant anything to anyone!” I didn’t know others liked me so much.” No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. I never knew if they discussed

them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another again.

That group of students moved on. Several years later, after I returned from vacation, my parents met me at the airport. As we were driving home, Mother asked me the usual questions about the trip, the weather, my experiences in general. There was a lull in the conversation. Mother gave Dad a sideways glance and simply says, "Dad?"

My father cleared his throat as he usually did before something important. "The Eklunds called last night," he began "Really?" I said. "I haven't heard from them in years. I wonder how Mark is." Dad responded quietly. "Mark was killed in Vietnam," he said. "The funeral is tomorrow, and his parents would like it if you could attend."

To this day I can still point to the exact spot on I-494 where Dad told me about Mark.

I had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. Mark looked so handsome, so mature. All I could think at that moment was, "Mark, I would give all the masking tape in the world if only you would talk to me." The church was packed with Mark's friends Chuck's sister sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Why did it have to rain on the day of the funeral? It was difficult enough at the graveside. The pastor said the usual prayers, and the bugler played taps.

One by one those who loved Mark took a last walk by the coffin and sprinkled it with holy water. I was the last one to bless the coffin. As I stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to me. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. I nodded as I continued to stare at the coffin. "Mark talked about you a lot," he said.

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates headed to Chuck's farmhouse for lunch. Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting for me. "We want to show you something, his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously

been taped, folded and refolded many times. I knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which I had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it." Mark's classmates started to gather around us. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. I keep it in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said without batting an eyelash. "I think we all saved our lists." That's when I finally sat down and cried. I cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again.

The density of people in society is so thick that we forget that life will end one day. And we don't know when that one day will be. So please, tell the people you love and care for, that they are special and important. Tell them, before it is too late.

Though her story was written years ago, I'd contend that it's more timely than ever, because as a society, we can become more and more isolated and polarized. But, Saint Paul reminds us this is not how it's supposed to be. In our second reading from today, Paul says to his flock at Corinth: "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit." And in our first reading from Nehemiah, the people hear the law of Moses at a place called the Water Gate, so named because it suggests the law is a source of life. The people respond, initially weeping, perhaps because they were reminded of the failures made in the past, but Nehemiah and Ezra insist that the people celebrate, and of course live out the law. Jesus of course will many years later summarize the entire law into love of God and love of neighbor. And as humans, let's face it, we have problems with both. Last week, I talked a little bit about how we can love God and express that through prayer, and this week, I'd like to just reflect briefly on how we can support and build up one another in the body rather than tear one another down.

With respect to how we treat our neighbors, when you think about Paul's words, they are so timely because we today are more aware than ever before of our differences. In one sense that can be a good thing; we've tried to work at combatting racism and sexism, and tried to be more sensitive to the needs of others. But the flip side is that due to the effects of original sin, we can be polarized, or quick to attack and judge. So I think a few key things to remember with respect to the body is to try to ultimately build one another up and help, rather than be so quick to tear down.

The first is with respect to judgment. In the line right after our Gospel ends, the gossip begins. Luke 4: 22 states: "They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" And a few lines in verses 28-29 "They were all filled with fury...They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But he passed through the midst of them and went away." Jesus challenges them saying a prophet is not accepted in his native place, and talks about how there were consequences for rejecting prophets, something they do not want to hear. So they quickly judge the young rabbi from Nazareth and try to kill Him, something they will eventually succeed in doing. In our world today, we can kill too. We don't use stones, but we use keystrokes on a

computer, we use the poison of gossip, and things can quickly snowball. For instance, just this past week, I've been following the story of the Catholic students from Covington, Kentucky at the March for Life. A week ago on Saturday, a few seconds of a video showed what appeared to be derogatory actions from several towards a native American. This quickly spread on social media, was picked up by national news outlets, and even their own school and diocese issued a statement saying they condemned the behavior and apologized to the Native American in question. Then, within 24 hours, more video emerged which painted a very different picture, and the story also changed. Frankly, I was so incensed by the whole thing that I wrote the diocese. And apparently others did too, as yesterday the Bishop of the diocese issued an apology again, this time to the students saying we blew it, we were bullied into making a rash statement before we knew the facts. My point was this: I have no idea what transpired, I was not there. The students may have been in the wrong. The Native American man who approached them may have been in the wrong. It may be a little of both. We don't know. I'm in no position to judge that event, because I do not have the facts. But it was completely reckless for a diocese to condemn something before there has been an examination of the facts, which thankfully the bishop recognized a few days later. There are situations that

come up both in the national media, at school, at work, where it is so easy to judge based on race, political affiliation, or whatever it may be. I even felt that a little bit myself this past week when waiting to get into my parking spot before a funeral, I sounded my horn at two cars because neither driver was paying attention and they were about to hit one another by backing up into each other. Somehow they missed, but I guess at least one driver thought the priest was just impatient wanting to get into his parking space. The point is when we judge, we want to ultimately try to help someone, and that's it. Bishop Robert Barron, the auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles and bishop who does a lot for catechesis with speeches and videos, says it best. In his words on an article he wrote on the Covington situation and judging entitled "The Internet and Satan's Game": **"When you're about to make a comment, ask yourself a very simple question: ***Am I doing this out of love, out of a sincere wish for the good of the person or persons I'm addressing?***" If not, shut up. If it becomes clear that your comment is simply spleen-venting, scapegoating, or virtue-signalling, shut up. The internet can be a marvelous tool, and it can be a weapon used for Satanic purposes. Applying the test of love can very effectively undermine the scapegoating mechanism and drive the devil out."** His article was on the devil being active on social media and

how within hours 50,000 people had commented attacking the teens from Covington, their lives quickly changed. Folks, it's not just social media, but when we gossip, tear down, smear or condemn without knowing the facts, and when we do so for no other point other than to vent but ultimately not to help the person, Bishop Barron is right, it's probably best to just keep our mouths shut or our computer turned off. Ideally, I'd hope a situation would not play out online, but would be handled where a person who commits a wrong is talked to, learns from their mistake, makes restitution if appropriate and moves on. That's how we handle it in the confessional. And I think if we had a segment of video of our life out there for all to see, people might think very differently of us. So hopefully we think before we judge, and judge for the right reasons.

Secondly, it's so important to tolerate differences. As I've shared before, I'm very opinionated on my politics, on my sports teams, and can get passionate about things. But it seems on all sides, this tolerance has waned. I truly believe some people have this reaction like a bull to a red cape when they see things like a person wearing political garb that is opposite to their own views, or people of a different religion. One of my favorite stories is that of Henry Fonda and Jimmy Stewart. Fonda was an

agnostic liberal Democrat; Stewart a churchgoing conservative Republican. They were very different, but they didn't talk politics or work. They built kites and model airplanes and when the moment was right thought of elaborate practical jokes and found a spirit of relaxation that eluded them as individuals. Their friendship is highlighted in the book "Hank & Jim" by Scott Eyman. The point is it is OK to be different. In some cases, maybe just avoid talking politics or the things that can be divisive. But in other cases, talk through disagreements. Have an actual argument rather than a shouting match. Listen rather than interject. At the very least, try to pray for people, even those you don't like. They are part of the body too! Work on letting go of grudges. And realize that even with someone who is seemingly very different, you may find you have a lot in common.

Lastly, take a page from from Sister Helen and build one another up. We are so quick to criticize and judge these days and to tear down, but think about the power of positivity. Of forgiving. Of saying something kind towards another person. Or of a simple act of kindness. Of listening. The world can really beat us up, and people can sometimes feel so isolated and be treated with such cruelty, but if we respond with kindness, like Mark's

classmates did for him, we are reminded that we are loved and have value because we are all part of the body of Christ.

I'm really not sure what gets people wound up so easily these days. Maybe it's the media, or the access to the internet where you can spread things quickly, or that desire inside of us to have a scapegoat so we can think not about the wooden beam in our eye but the splinter in our brothers. How we treat one another as humans can be downright pathetic. Hopefully we remember that no matter what a person's story is, they are always created in the image of God, for we are all part of the body of Christ. So lets build one another up and live out God's commandment to love one another, rather than tear one another down.