

The opening words this morning, much of ministry is a benediction, by Susan Manker-Seale, I found and used for the first time at our staff retreat this past August. This idea that the author lifts up, of speaking well of one another, seemed to call out to me.

And I realized it's because, for maybe the first time in my life, I am working with a group of people for whom this is true. We speak well of one another. We respect each other's skills, we trust one another to do our jobs and do them well, and we support one another in the work that we are doing.

And how rare is that? To be a part of a group of people where we don't allow our insecurities to show up in ways that damage our relationships. I feel so blessed on a constant basis that I get to work with these amazing, talented human beings. And that we don't feel the need to put one another down to lift ourselves up.

And these insecurities that we live with day in and day out, the stories that we tell ourselves about how we're not good enough, not talented enough, not attractive enough, if we don't have the courage to recognize them for what they are, they can harm our relationship with yourself and others.

I imagine you have all been a part of a group at some point in your life where the people, or maybe just one or two individuals within the group, did not speak well of one another. Perhaps you've experienced it in a workplace, which, in my experience, is fairly common, or in a school or classroom, in a social group, or even in a romantic relationship. Where someone is constantly putting others down in an effort to make themselves look or feel better.

And this plays out in subtle, and not so subtle, ways. Maybe it's the periodic offhand comment about another person showing up late or leaving early. "Did you notice that George left early again today? I wish I could get away with that." Or pointing out how much work they are doing compared to others. "Carla only finishes one project a week and I do five." Or those individuals who feel the need to go to a supervisor or teacher to make sure that they are aware of some other people's inadequacies. Just to be helpful.

Or even the really insidious ways that we compliment people by putting others down. "You were so great, so much better than that other person."

Too often this is the norm. And how rare and special is it when we experience the opposite? When we have the opportunity to be around those individuals who only

Speak well of others. Who supports those around them. Who lifts them up? Who genuinely seem to get joy out of other people's successes.

And I can only imagine that these people are not free from insecurities themselves. They also experience self-doubt, they also worry about if they are good enough. But they have the courage to face those insecurities and choose not to allow them to define their behavior. To do what Brene Brown invites us to do, which is to say "Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging." And so are you. So are you.

And the other behaviors, the put downs and the criticism, that comes from a place of insecurity. I recently read a statement online, and I apologize that there was no attribution, that said "all unasked for advice is criticism." All unasked for advice is criticism.

Does that statement sit uncomfortably with you? And if it does, ask yourself why?

So often we criticize others because we feel insecure. We feel threatened by them. By their very being. By their life and passion and talents. We are taught at a very young age that everyone out there is competition in some way. And it's true, some things in life are a competition. There are prizes awarded and people are ranked as winners and losers, like in our story today. And sometimes we make competitions where none need to exist. I have had to intentionally break myself of the habits that I learned as a child of pitting my children against each other as a parenting tactic. Let's see who can get dressed the quickest! The first one to brush their teeth is the winner!

There are so many ways that we re-enforce this idea that everything in life is a contest to see who is the best.

But even beyond the places where we are explicitly told that there are winners and losers, a prize to be won, we are also taught that people are competing with us in almost every aspect of our lives. That we should feel threatened by others because they are going to take our jobs, take our promotions, take our potential romantic partners or friends, take our positions in leadership. And it can make it hard for us to hold onto our own self-worth when that worth is constantly being compared to what everyone else has.

It can be hard to remember that you are enough.

It can feel challenging to lift others up and be truly happy about their successes. To not allow our vulnerabilities to color our relationships. To recognize how society and culture has taught us to view others as a threat, and how harmful that is. To speak well of one another.

And when we are brave enough to acknowledge those insecurities we can make a choice about how we react to them.

And a part of that is this damaging notion that our worth is somehow tied to our productivity. It can make us want to shout, don't you see how productive I am? How much work I'm getting done? How many hours I put in? How I never rest? Can't you see that I am worthy?

But, our worth is not our productivity. And this can be a hard one for me. This really touches at the heart of my own personal insecurities, this idea that my worth is tied to my productivity. That all that matters is the end product and how that product is perceived by others. And maybe you can relate. To the unending pressure to do it all. To be everything for everyone.

And this capitalist society that we live in wants us to think that. Because the more we are working and the more productive we are the more we strive to make more money so we can buy more things so that we can somehow live up to these unrealistic expectations of who we ought to be, the more we feed back into capitalism itself.

And I'm not going to give you a lecture on the evils of capitalism, I'm sure many of you could do a much more thorough job than I, no. I am going to remind you again that you are enough. That your worth is not equal to your productivity. How big your house is or how much money you make.

You don't have to do everything all the time.

Many of you know that I spent the last two and a half years homeschooling my children. It was a lot of work and we had a lot of fun too. We did art and science projects, we went on adventures, we made music. I got to spend every day hanging out with my kids, and then I spent every evening and weekend working.

This fall my family made the decision that my kids were going to go back to public school. They were understandably nervous, the last time my youngest had been in school was Pre-K, and for less than a full year of that even, and now she was going to

be starting 2nd grade. For my oldest she started 4th grade this fall after having last attended only a portion of 1st grade. So a big change for all of us.

That first day I went down to the end of the road after school to get them off of the bus and my kids walked down those steps and told me that school was amazing. They loved it. Their little faces were beaming up at me as they competed to tell me all about their day.

And I'm going to be honest here, there was a part of me that wanted them to come home and, not tell me that it was terrible, no. Because I want my kids to be happy. But there was this tiny part of me that wanted them to say, it was great but not as good as homeschooling. Not as good as you. Because there is this part of me that has been taught that everything is a competition, right? That if their new public school experience is amazing then obviously that means that what I offered to them, and therefore some integral part of myself, was lesser.

And I could have responded to their words in that way that we sometimes do when we are feeling vulnerable, when we are feeling insecure. And I could have said to them, oh I'm so glad that you had a good day but it wasn't as good as homeschooling right? And it would have been understandable. No one would fault me for that very human response.

But I didn't. I acknowledged that little voice that was telling me that I wasn't enough but I didn't let it dictate to me how I was going to respond.

Instead I said to my kids, I am so happy that you had an amazing day at school. Tell me all about it.

And they did. And I allowed myself to let go of my insecurities and be happy for them, to be happy with them.

Because I want to be that person, that rare person, who speaks well of others. Who honestly and truly finds joy in other people's successes. Who is happy when other people are happy. I want to be brave enough to really believe it when I tell myself that I am enough. To be wholehearted.

And to lift you up so that you know it too. Because you are brave. You are worthy. You are enough.

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