

PRAY

Jesus, you inspire us to heal and forgive others as you did, to welcome the outcast into your circle. Help us heal the harm and hurt we all do and experience from others. Walk with us when we reach out beyond our circle of friends to include others. Amen.

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time



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SPiRIT

BY MONICA JANZEN

One day I heard a friend talking about how lame she felt in junior high and high school. She called that period of her life the “troll years” because she felt so ugly, isolated, uncoordinated, and alone.

The trolls are those frightening creatures under the bridge in the “Three Billy Goats Gruff.” I understood instantly what my friend was talking about.

These were the years when I wanted to look cool, but I had braces and bad hair. I wanted to be athletic but was totally uncoordinated. I wanted to be a babe, but I tried too hard. It all started in junior high. My mom was getting a perm and I wanted one, too. I knew that my blonde hair would look full, bouncy, shiny and vibrant if I had a perm. We went to some salon running a perm special. That was our first mistake. Our second mistake was assuming our hairdresser had a clue.

We watched passively as she picked out the smallest rollers and tightly bound up our hair. My mom and I always looked kind of alike. After our perms, we were twins—both with blonde afros.

When my hair finally grew out, I felt better about myself even though my



istock photo: Charity Myers

teeth were crooked and I had an overbite. But then I hit a growth spurt. I grew six inches in one summer. I went from 5’2” to 5’8” overnight. I was extremely thin and incredibly uncoordinated. My brothers made up an action song about me. They sang and imitated the “lanky gazelle” whenever they saw me coming.

When I started high school, I was 5’8” and weighed 90 pounds. People came up to me in gym class and grabbed my arm.

“I can break your arm,” they’d say. “You are so skinny. Are you anorexic?”

I’d pull my long, gangly limb back toward my emaciated body. “Leave me alone. You should see how much I can eat.” It was the truth. I was always hungry. If I missed one meal, I’d pass out from starvation. I ate breakfast, morning snack, a huge lunch, a snack when I got home, a gigantic dinner, and cereal before I went to bed. I could not gain any weight.

TROLL YEARS

GIRLS

My weight was not my only problem. Red spots burst forth from every pore on my face. I scrubbed, washed, and tried every acne treatment. I

couldn't do anything to improve my looks. Fortunately, I had some great friends who were willing to cope with being trolls together.

I remember sitting with my friend Shelby at a basketball game and realizing she had a gigantic forehead. The way she wore her hair accented its vast magnitude. I suggested she cut some bangs to make her forehead look smaller. She told me that I had a ski-jump nose. She said that when I pulled my hair back, I could poke



someone's eye out with my nose. We both laughed. I knew Shelby wasn't serious and only wanted me to look better. We could poke fun at each other without being cruel.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I organized a welcome picnic for the new students. I stopped on the crowded quad for a moment as I busily ran around. I was staring off in the distance, thinking, when this very cool,

star football player looked up and saw me staring in his direction.

"What are you looking at?" he sneered loudly in front of everyone. "This is nothing you can have," he laughed.

His words reminded me instantly that I was still a troll. I felt so embarrassed I wanted to disappear. I felt the whole school staring at me. I said nothing and walked away.

After my shame wore away, I realized this guy was a total loser. Who would ever have the nerve to say something so mean except some total egomaniac? I may have been a troll, but one outgrows this stage like the ugly duckling. On the other hand, his attitude might be for life.

A large graphic of the word 'TROLL' in a stylized, blocky font. Each letter contains a different photograph of a student. The 'T' is red and contains a photo of a young man with blonde hair. The first 'R' is blue and contains a photo of a young man with dark hair. The 'O' is green and contains a photo of a young man with glasses. The second 'R' is red and contains a photo of a young man with dark hair. The 'L' is purple and contains a photo of a young man with dark hair. The 'S' is purple and contains a photo of a young man with dark hair. To the right of the letters is the word 'Years' in a large, red, sans-serif font. Below the letters is the text 'Male Edition' in a blue, sans-serif font.

TROLL Years

Male Edition

BY ADVEN JAMES

No point in sugar-coating it: junior high was a miserable experience. I know this isn't the case for everyone, but it is for this sci-fi reading, ferret-owning, RPG-playing, computer-loving, lame-at-sports, awkward-around-girls, acne-faced lump who is trying at all costs to avoid being noticed. There's a guy like that in every class. And I am that guy—in every class.

Socially speaking, I have no illusions about myself. I know what I look like and how inept I am at everything. Kids in junior high get very creative with their labels. Sometimes their creativity impressed me, just before the sting of feeling like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. I never got used to it. Not really ever.

"All I have to do is make it to high school," I kept telling myself. The hope of a new beginning—free of torment and social isolation—made the summer after my 8th grade year one of the happiest of my life. I started running a little bit and liked it. Things were going to be different. I was sure of it...until...

Two weeks before school started I opened my e-mail and found an invitation to a Facebook page. I was too excited even to notice whose page it was...turns out it was mine. On the screen was my profile—only I didn't make it. The page changed one letter in my name, but it was me. Someone had gotten a hold of some of the worst photos of me I had ever seen.

The wall already had a bunch of comments from kids at the high

school I was heading to in days—people I hadn't even met yet—that seemed to be pulled right out of my junior high hallways. I stopped reading after I got to, "I'm going to beat this kid senseless." Even if I had wanted to keep reading, I couldn't. My eyes had filled with tears. The next four years were going to be like the past three.

I kept my head down the first day of high school. I didn't recognize anyone and hoped no one would recognize me. "Head down. Just get to class." That was my mantra. I hoped for safety in math class. I'm good at math. There had to be people in math that liked the subject as much as I did.

The guy next to me seemed pretty into math and even more into his

SUNDAY GOSPEL

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus heals a leper.

NARRATOR 1: A leper approached Jesus with a request.

LEPER: If you want to, you can cure me.

NARRATOR 2: Jesus was moved with pity. He stretched out his hand and touched him.

JESUS: I do want to. Be cured.

NARRATOR 1: At once the leprosy left the man and he was cured. Jesus gave him a stern warning and sent him on his way.

JESUS: Do not tell anyone about this. Go now and present yourself to the priest and offer for your cure what Moses prescribed. That should be a proof to everyone that you are cured.

NARRATOR 2: The leper went off and began to tell everyone what had happened. As a result, it was no longer possible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He stayed in desert places; yet people kept coming to him from all sides.

Mark 1.40-45

calculator app on his iPhone. I leaned over and told him about a skinnable calculator app that I had found earlier that month. He was impressed! Not only that, but he introduced himself to me. I told him about the small school I hailed from and how miserable it was. He said he knew exactly what I was talking about. For the first time—ever—someone understood me.

We decided to sit together at lunch. He said he would introduce me to a few of his friends. Friends! He had friends! This was the networking highlight of my young life. Until...I didn't mean to sneak up on my new friend in the lunch room. I had just gotten good at being invisible. He was bragging to his friends about meeting me, the kid he made the joke Facebook page about. I overheard "...beat him senseless" as I slunk away.

He never did beat me senseless—at least not physically. Emotionally, mentally, socially—he beat me to a bloody pulp. He expanded the Facebook site to Twitter, Tumblr, and every other social media site where he could spread nicknames, insults, photoshopped pictures, and rumors as quickly and widespread as possible—name it, he did it. He was ruining what little life I had. He always greeted me with a smile in math class. I thought about making a big deal out of it—getting the authorities involved or

something. But I felt too defeated to try. Everything was going to be exactly the same as junior high.

I got used to being alone. I embraced all the things I loved. Of course, these are the same things like being good at math and computers that put the bullseye on my head. I did my best to tune out the bullying.

Strangely enough, the more I let myself enjoy the things I loved, the more I started to meet people, who liked weird pets, sci-fi and RPGs, and building websites and computers. I met people who thought I was interesting—even funny. People who wanted to eat lunch together and hang out after school. People that helped me realize that maybe the public perception of me was lame and not the other way around.

I didn't have a lot of friends. But they were good friends. I didn't win any popularity contests or get pictured much in the year book, but I got something better. I got to enjoy who I was.



QUESTIONS

- 1 When have you felt like a troll? What was starting high school like for you?
- 2 How have you handled bullies in your life?
- 3 Who gets treated with disrespect in your school?
- 4 How is a leper like a troll?
- 5 What is Jesus' attitude toward lepers and probably trolls?

OUR CATHOLIC FAITH

Peer ministry

From the first days of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, he calls men and women to minister to their peers.

The message Jesus announces is simple: God's kingdom is near. He invites listeners to get an attitude—an attitude of believing, a change of heart that opens their lives toward God.

To four ordinary fishermen—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—Jesus says, "Come, follow me. Fish with me for people to gather into my new community." He raises up Peter's mother-in-law, who becomes the first woman to give her life to serving the new community.

Jesus travels about the villages of Galilee, healing lepers as he does in Sunday's gospel, forgiving sinners, freeing people from addictive spirits, and welcoming outsiders into his new company of disciples.

The leper in this Sunday's gospel shows a believing attitude when he begs Jesus to make him whole. Jesus feels compassion for the man, who must live apart from healthy people. Jesus reaches out and heals him. No wonder the man tells everyone he meets. He wants others to be whole and belong to Jesus' new community as he does.

Jesus calls us to share his revolutionary attitude. He calls us to collect trolls and outcasts and welcome them into our groups. Today we don't refer to ourselves as fishers of people but rather peer ministers. Ministering means attending to others, listening to them, connecting outsiders with insiders.

Peer ministry is serving people of one's own age group. Peers know how important it is to go to the prom, how difficult math tests are, how rarely parents extend their curfew. Peer ministry is as ordinary as listening to a friend who needs to talk, comforting a friend who is crying, inviting a new classmate to a party, or encouraging a talented classmate to try out for a team or play.

Some schools and parishes train special peer ministers. For example, a group might prepare youth liturgies and retreats, or reach out to those getting left behind socially or academically. They may learn how to connect peers in trouble with counselors or treatment programs. Schools sometimes train peer ministers in mediating violence and confrontations between students.

Teen years bring a dawning awareness of what other people think of us. We notice who wears the latest shoes or shirts or designer jeans. We notice who listens to the music we like. We notice who looks attractive, who



By his word, through signs that manifest the reign of God, and by sending out his disciples, Jesus calls all people to come together around him.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #542

is coordinated at sports, who says dumb things, who is clueless.

To be popular themselves, teens drop old friends or shun unpopular kids, putting them outside the in group the way lepers were kept away from the villages of healthy people in Jesus' time. A leper is the classic outsider in Jesus' time.

Schools don't have lepers, but they do have students whom others treat as if they had a contagious disease. The disease is social. No one wants to be seen with them. No one wants to get labeled loser.

In these years we do terrible, hurtful things to one another. School shootings express the anger of students who feel they are outcasts. Many other students report feelings of isolation and pain or incidents of being harassed or picked on so extreme they begin to think of suicide. Our feelings of self-worth rise and fall on how we fit in during these years.

The teen years challenge young people to make and keep friendships, to break unhealthy relationships, and mend broken friendships. For each of us, learning who I am as an individual means learning who I am in relation to others. We need practice to learn how to say no and break up, how to say hi and risk getting to know someone.

Because each of us influences others, we all act as peer ministers. We must choose to meet each person with an open and compassionate heart, treat all our peers with respect and dignity, try hard not to confine people to labels, and be open to the ways the Spirit moves us to minister to all groups.

What Do Peer Ministers Do?

1. Listen to others.
2. Welcome all peers.
3. Make choices that benefit others.
4. Share faith.
5. Learn to be honest with others.



FAITH in ACTION

- 1 Of what value might peer ministers be in your school or parish? How could you get a group started?
- 2 What kind of community-building sports or activities might your youth group sponsor to include other young people? Consider volleyball, or coffeehouse night with youth performers or a local singer.
- 3 With what neighboring youth groups in other churches, mosques, or synagogues might you build community through a shared activity?

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