

Let us oft speak kind words to each other (Hymns, no. 232).

BY HEATHER KIRBY

(Based on a true story)

Hurry, Heather, or you'll miss the bus." Mom handed me a granola bar. "I guess that's breakfast."

"My bus driver won't let us eat on the bus, but he eats all the time," I grumbled. "And he doesn't need to—he's a big guy!"

Mom frowned. "Heather . . ."

"Oh." I blinked. "That wasn't very nice, was it?"

Mom shook her head. "Sometimes you say unkind things without thinking. You need to be careful."

On the bus, I looked for my best friend, Amber, at her stop, but only her little sister Rachel got on.

"Where's Amber?" I asked.

"She's sick," Rachel said, lisping. "Can I sit here?"

"I guess," I said, sliding over. Rachel was always hanging around Amber and me. She was all right, but Amber was my best friend, not her. Rachel was a little different, with her thick glasses and funny way of talking.

At recess, I played dodgeball with my friends, but I missed Amber. Then I noticed the new girl, Megan. She stood at the edge of the playground. I walked up to her. "Do you want to play dodgeball with us?"

After school, when Megan and I got on the same bus, we sat together. I told her about the other kids.

"That's Carlos. He's the smartest kid in our grade—but I beat him in reading! Over there are Caitlin and Jessica. They live on my street. And that's Matt. He plays soccer."

"Who's that with the glasses?" Megan asked.

"That's Rachel. She's my best friend's little sister." I paused. "She has a speech impediment."

"What?"

"She talks funny. But she's going to a class to help her."

"Nice glasses." Megan snickered. "I've never seen them so thick."

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. Sure, Rachel sometimes annoyed me when Amber and I were playing, but she was a nice girl. And now Megan was making fun of her.

I changed the subject. We talked about other things, and soon I forgot about Rachel and the sinking feeling I'd had.

The next day, I was happy to see Amber back at school.

"I know how to make dodgeball even better," she said at recess. "When you get out, you have to sing a





silly song and do a dance.” She demonstrated for us.

“I can see that weirdness runs in your family,” Megan said, laughing as she turned to me. She seemed to expect me to laugh too.

“What are you talking about?” Amber asked. “You don’t even know my family.”

Megan smiled, but it wasn’t a nice smile. “Heather said your sister is retarded!”

My mouth fell open.

“Heather is my best friend,” Amber cried. “She wouldn’t say that!”

“Well, she did. Ask her!” Megan smirked.

Everyone looked at me. “I didn’t say that,” I whispered, “but I did say that she talked funny.”

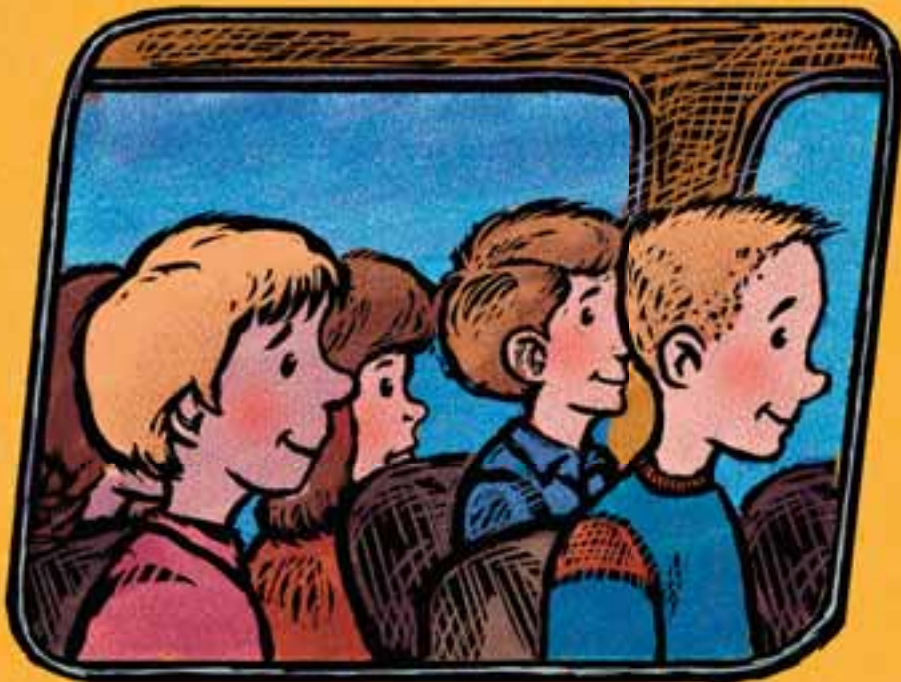
Amber’s face fell. I glanced down, not wanting to see her hurt expression. “I shouldn’t have, though,” I added quickly. “It doesn’t matter. Rachel’s great!”

“My sister’s not retarded,” Amber said to Megan. “But even if she were, it wouldn’t be nice to make fun of her.”

Megan folded her arms. “Fine. Let’s just play.”

As everyone lined up, I turned to Amber. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK,” she said. But her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.



Girlfriends and Gossip

After school, Mom asked, “Why so glum, Heather?”
“I think I did something wrong. I was telling a new girl about people, and I said Rachel talked funny. Amber found out, and it made her sad. I don’t know why I said it, Mom. But it wasn’t like I was lying!”

“Oh, Heather.” Mom sat across from me. “Yes, Rachel has a speech impediment. But that doesn’t have to be the first thing you say about her.”

“It’s not even an important thing about Rachel,” I agreed.

“Do you know what gossip is?” Mom asked.

“Not exactly.”

“It’s when you talk about people when they’re not around,” she explained. “It doesn’t matter if the things you say are true or not. They don’t need to be said.”

I thought about that as I went to my room to do homework. When I got there, a hymn popped into my head. I ran and grabbed a hymnbook, opening it to “Let Us Oft Speak Kind Words” (*Hymns*, no. 232).

I’d always liked the song because in the first verse it has the word *heather*—like my name. But I realized I should have paid more attention to the part about speaking kind words to—and about—each other. Rachel was a good person, and my friend, and it didn’t matter if she had a speech impediment. I decided that when I talked about a person, I would focus on her good qualities.

Later, at Amber’s house, after we had decided to dress up as movie stars, I noticed Rachel peeking around the door.

“Let’s not forget Rachel,” I said, opening the door and throwing my arm around her. “It’s always more fun with you!”

Rachel beamed at me, and when Amber smiled it lit up her whole face. ●



“Use language that uplifts, encourages, and compliments others.”⁴

For the Strength of Youth

