

Good morning, everyone!

It's great to be with you this morning as we get to share something that is really close to our hearts.

For those of you who don't know me, I run a program here at Southridge called Brave Girls. Brave Girls is a three-year leadership program for girls in Grades 6–8.

The program has been running for over 15 years in partnership with an incredible woman named Ellen Duffield. Ellen is passionate, wise, and deeply committed to seeing both men and women lead well together. Through years of research and experience, she recognized many of the barriers girls often face and helped create a program that intentionally equips them to overcome those challenges.

Through Brave Girls, our goal is to help young women grow in their confidence & resilience, learn to encourage and build one another up rather than compete with one another, deepen their relationship with God and each other, and lead in a way that is authentic to who God created them to be—recognizing that leadership doesn't look the same for everyone and that God uses different personalities and gifts in different ways.

I've had the privilege of leading the program for the past four or five years, and one of my favourite parts has been watching these girls grow into the young women they are today because of the unique kind of community that they found in Brave Girls.

This morning, we're joined by three girls who have just graduated from the program. Rather than hearing from me, we thought it would be more meaningful for you to hear directly from them.

So, girls, why don't you each introduce yourselves? Tell everyone your name, who your family is here at Southridge, your parents, siblings, and maybe one fun fact about yourself.

1/ Looking back, how did being part of BRAVE girls help shape your relationship with Jesus?

Emma:

I would say the girls at brave helped me grow in my faith the most because of how encouraging and how faithful they truly are. The girls there made me feel welcome and made it a safe space to open up and talk about my faith and my struggles and I feel like what I really needed was girls who I could talk to that would understand and listen to me. We did a lesson with two masks and on the one mask we wrote negative thoughts that we sometimes tell ourselves and on the other mask was filled with kind and positive things about Who We are. That lesson reminded me that we can choose which voice we listen to and we should choose the one that speaks truth. I feel like I don't always speak truth to myself or about myself and that lesson helped me to start being kinder to myself, others, and speak truth and realize all the great things God given me.

Paityn:

Being part of BRAVE really showed me how Jesus is always with us and that He will always be there for me. And so now I've learned that I can always talk to Him no matter where I am or what it's about because he will always be listening. The first time when we all went to the Jericho house for a BRAVE GIRLS retreat we did a lesson with stations and at every station there was a new way that you could connect with Jesus like writing down something that might have been hard for you at the time and then praying about it, and ever since that lesson I have felt much closer to Jesus and with the help of all of the amazing people that I have gotten to know at BRAVE I feel like I have built a very strong relationship with Him.

Kaylin:

Brave girls has shaped my relationship with Jesus so much. I always thought following Jesus had to be neat, and in a specific way. But, recently I've learned there are so many different ways to show your love to God and it definitely doesn't have to be neat at all. All my years in Brave taught me that, but one specific recent moment truly defined that for me. It was our last retreat with the year ones and we had to share why we encourage to stay in brave. This is kind of embarrassing, but we all broke down in tears and then had a little worship session with Sarah-Jade's guitar and our voices. It felt so special with all my closest friends around me. That really taught me that following Jesus can get messy, and the people around you will help you in your journey with faith.

SJ:

That was such a special moment.

From a leader's perspective, I wasn't just watching a group of girls; I was watching a group that had become a safe place for one another. Throughout the years, I heard so many of you say the same thing in different ways: *"I've never experienced a community like this before."* It felt more like family.

Middle school can be so difficult to navigate, but somewhere along the way this became a place where you could be completely and authentically yourselves—where

you didn't have to worry about being judged or fitting a certain mold. You could simply come as you were, knowing you'd be loved and cared for.

I remember that moment so clearly. As leaders, it impacted us just as much as it impacted you girls. I don't cry very often—my husband would tell you that's a rarity—but I definitely had tears in my eyes. I remember grabbing my guitar, and as we started singing together, it felt like the whole room took a deep breath. It was one of those moments where you could almost sense Jesus sitting with us, bringing peace to each of you.

Imagine what our church would look like if we were that comfortable being known. If we were willing to be that vulnerable with one another. If we truly relied on the community God has given us instead of trying to carry everything on our own.

I wonder how often we miss moments with Jesus because we're trying to follow Him in isolation. Scripture tells us that faith was never meant to be lived alone. For example, in Hebrews 10:24, we are told to encourage each other and to, “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

God designed us to encourage one another, carry one another's burdens, and remind each other of truth. When we create spaces where people can come as they are and know they'll be loved, Jesus has a beautiful way of meeting us there.

2/ Can you share a time when the community you found in BRAVE girls supported you through something difficult?

Emma:

A difficult time that the girls have helped me through was probably when my childhood dog died. Now I only told a couple of girls so not many of them knew but it helped that they were always willing to talk and be there for me. They helped me without even knowing I needed help. They've shown me that God gives me strength and that he's always by my side through my struggles like it says in Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.

Paityn:

At the first BRAVE retreat we were talking to each other about things we wanted to pray about and I asked if they could pray with me about something that was going on with my extended family and they really helped me to know that as long as I trust in God everything will work itself out the way God wants it to.

Kaylin:

Throughout this year something I have struggled with is putting myself up to such a high standards. I always had to have the perfect grade, I couldn't mess up in sports, and I had to act perfectly. It was really affecting my well being because if I messed up I would be mad at myself, and that made me feel horrible about myself. In winter I became really close with a few of the brave girls because of the deep freeze retreat. They really helped me understand my self worth by being so encouraging and kind. It felt like God had put them into my life at the perfect time, and it almost felt God was actively working through them. After that I was able to be easier on myself, and that whole experience made me learn just how amazing God's timing is and that he can work through people to care for us.

SJ:

I love that all three of your stories point to the same truth: Jesus often meets us through the people around us. But that only happens when we're willing to be known, to be vulnerable, and to let others walk alongside us.

In Galatians 6:2, we are urged to, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Doing community in this way is what it means to follow Jesus.

We weren't meant to follow Jesus alone. So often, God cares for us, encourages us, reminds us of truth, and even carries us through difficult seasons by working through the people around us. It's truly an amazing gift that each of us needs in our lives and exactly what we all need to lean into.

3/ In BRAVE we often talk about "When one rises, we all rise." What has that meant in your life?

Emma:

The phrase when one rises we all rise teaches me to celebrate others instead of comparing myself to them. It reminds me that your small victories will be celebrated by the people who love you most. Like at the start of each Brave meeting when everyone would share something that they accomplished, something they did that was Brave, or just something they wanted to share. We all celebrate with them, because when one person rises we all rise.

Paityn:

That lesson really taught me that instead of comparing myself to others I should celebrate what they have achieved and recognize that I have my own talents and strengths that I can also be proud of, and now I know that I will always have people around me that will celebrate with me and that I can celebrate with them.

Kaylin:

The quote “when one rises we all rise” was always taught in brave girls. A lot of the time you see in everyday life people cutting people down when they rise, but being brave helped teach us the opposite. To rise with other people and celebrate others instead of comparing myself to them. At the beginning of every brave meet we do something called brave wins. Basically, that is when we share an accomplishment we made and no matter how big or small we celebrate each other. Having everybody around me encourage me and celebrate me has helped me to become the person God created me to be! Being with brave girls was also such a positive environment full of encouragement. I remember when we had to give our speeches at brave graduation, I had to go first and I was so nervous, but every girl was just saying “you got this Kaylin!” or “you can do it!” and I walked up on that stage feeling more confident than before the other girls helping me to rise. Through brave girls, I created so many healthy relationships built on celebrating the uniqueness in God’s creations.

SJ:

I love how all three of you talked about choosing celebration over comparison. That doesn't come naturally to us. We live in a world that tells us to compete, climb the ladder, and get ahead—even if it means leaving other people behind. But Jesus invites us into a completely different way of living.

Emma, you mentioned Philippians 4:13: *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."* That reminded me of another verse in Ecclesiastes 4:9–10: *"Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."*

I think those two verses go beautifully together. Jesus is our source of strength, but so often He chooses to strengthen us through the people He places around us. We were never meant to walk through life or faith alone.

When I think about so much of the brokenness in our world, I can't help but wonder what it would look like if more people lived the way you girls have learned to live. Instead of comparing ourselves to one another, what if we celebrated each other. Instead of trying to get ahead, we looked for ways to help the person beside us succeed. I think our homes, our schools, our workplaces, even our churches, would look very different.

What if we lived like that as a church? What if each of us came here asking, "Who can I encourage? Who can I serve? Who can I help rise today?" And what if we trusted that someone else was asking those same questions about us?

If I'm looking out for you, and you're looking out for someone else, and they're looking out for someone else, then suddenly everyone is being cared for. That's the beauty of

the body of Christ. That's what Jesus had in mind when He called us to love one another. When each of us helps someone else rise, we all rise together.

4/ Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of BRAVE that might encourage people to embrace community?

Emma:

I would just like to say that when I started Brave I didn't really know who God was. I mean I believed in him but I didn't understand the full meaning of following him, but now I understand more than I ever did. Brave has shown me that God is always by my side and that there's nothing I can't do without God. As I move on into the next chapter of my life, I would like to remember that God is always there to help me through my struggles and he's always willing to listen. If you're feeling distant from God or you feel you're betraying him, you're not God is just waiting for you to find him so he can help you down the right path. Just stay faithful and stay strong, you'll find your way to Jesus.

Paityn:

My experience with BRAVE has showed me that I can always talk go to them whether I need to talk about something hard or I want to tell them about something good that happened, one of my favourite things we did at brave was share our brave wins, that really showed me that when I'm in a good community i can share anything with them and they will always be ready to support me.

Kaylin:

When I first joined Brave, I was a sixth grader with a few good friends at school. But I had no one to talk to about my faith or God, which made being a Christian even harder. And I was a typical sixth grader. I could be rude sometimes, and I would complain about the church. Ask my parents, they'll tell you all about it. But you know every now and then, I would have questions about God. Sure, when I had questions, I could ask my parents, but it wasn't really the same as having youth around me to talk to. Back then, I was a Christian who just believed in God because that's what I was taught growing up, but now I try to follow Jesus and live into my Christianity. And rather than a sometimes bratty little girl, I try to be more like Jesus. And especially I learned that by no means I have to follow Jesus alone. I used to be so private about my faith, as if it were embarrassing. Now going into high school, I'm going to keep that mindset, following Jesus isn't alone and embrace my faith. Because if I'm being honest it can be hard alone, although of course you have Jesus with you, it can help to have an outside example or person as similar age to lead you to God If anyone here is feeling disconnected to you faith or trying to do it it alone, I highly encourage talking to some people about it, get involved with the church to surround yourself with people who want to help you in your faith.

SJ:

Absolutely. Community makes all the difference.

From the very beginning, God's design was never for us to do life alone. We were created to live in relationship with Him and with one another. Sometimes we lose sight of that, but hearing your stories has reminded us of the incredible difference community can make, not only in our own lives, but in the lives of the people around us.

Community inspires us to know and follow Jesus more deeply. Community gives us a safe place to walk through the challenges of life. And community teaches us to celebrate one another's unique gifts, building each other up instead of tearing each other down.

Girls, thank you for sharing so honestly this morning. Thank you for letting us see what God has done in your lives, and for showing us the kind of community Jesus intended for all of us.

If you're here today and you're feeling lonely or disconnected, I want you to hear this: you are not alone. This church is a family, and you are loved, valued, and important. Sometimes people unintentionally get missed, but that doesn't mean you aren't wanted. If no one has reached out to you yet, I want to encourage you to take that first step. There are people here who would love to know you.

And for those of us who already feel connected, I think Jesus gives us a challenge too. If you see someone standing alone, invite them into the conversation. If you notice someone new, introduce yourself. Invite them to your table. Ask them about their story.

We sometimes think showing the love of Jesus requires some big, extraordinary act. But more often than not, it happens through simple conversations, intentional invitations, and making room for someone else. Those small moments can change a person's life. I want to leave you with this simple one verse in John 13:34-35 it says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It's not just about what we believe, but actually by how we love one another.

So let's be the kind of church where no one walks alone. Let's be a community that lifts one another up, celebrates one another's victories, carries one another's burdens, and reflects the love of Jesus in the way we care for each other.

Thank you, girls. We're so proud of each of you.

Prayer:

God, thank You for these incredible girls and for giving them the courage to share their stories with us this morning. It has been such a privilege to watch them grow closer to You and to one another through this community.

Lord, I pray that each of us would experience the kind of Christ-centered community we've heard about today. For those who feel lonely or disconnected, remind them that they were never meant to follow You alone. And for those of us who struggle to be vulnerable, would You gently break down those barriers so that we can experience Your love through the people You've placed around us.

Help us to be a church that builds one another up, carries one another's burdens, and reflects Your love in the way we care for each other. Amen.