

The Courage of Esthers

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21, 30 September 2018

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Those who worship regularly with St. Thomas know that our scriptures each Sunday are assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a three-year cycle of scripture readings shared by many Christian groups. The discipline of following the lectionary invites us to hear many parts of the Bible over three years. As a result, some key Bible stories are heard only once over the three years.

As it happens, today is Esther's day. In churches all over this country, today is the one Sunday in three years when we hear about a woman in the Bible who at great risk to herself spoke up about what a powerful advisor to the king was doing to her and to others.

The scripture lessons over the next several weeks provide illustrations of seven classic virtues. I am focusing today on the virtue of courage. So we will talk about Esther's courage.

But before we turn to her I need to say a few words about the gospel lesson because I know that's on everyone's minds. This word for hell in the Greek, Gehenna, occurs 11 times in the gospels. The word for fire occurs 28 times, a little more often. In case you are wondering, worm is only mentioned once. By contrast, forgive is mentioned 39 times, listen 51, bless 58, love 75, life 85, follow 90, and give 228.

In other words, Jesus talked about hell and fire occasionally, but they were not his main point.

When Jesus did speak about hell and fire it was often in a context similar to today's lesson. Consider Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats. In that parable, the goats were sent to the fire because they did not feed, welcome, clothe, care for, or visit the least of these. A similar point is being made here. The disciples came to Jesus in a tizzy because someone who was not yet in their group was acting like one of them. Jesus told them to be less suspicious and more welcoming. Those who are not against us are for us. If all someone can do is share a cup of cold water, that's a fine place to start. Then Jesus warned them not to put a stumbling block before any of these "little ones who believe in me."

Maybe he meant little ones by age or maybe he meant little ones in the faith, like the person casting out demons in his name. Either way, Jesus insisted we have a responsibility to one another. We are called to hold each other up rather than knock each other down. He was so emphatic he said it was better to lose a part of yourself than to put a stumbling block before others. If you aren't willing to lose yourself in this way, if you aren't willing to let go of the things in you that

cause others to stumble, then yes you are liable to hell. Making life hell for others has consequences.

Now none of us know what happens after we die, though I trust God will do what is best for all of us. But we do not have to talk about eternity to agree with Jesus that making life hell for others has consequences.

In his 1984 acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, in the midst of the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, Desmond Tutu insisted that human beings are of infinite value because they are created in the image of God. To treat people as anything less, he said, “ultimately recoils on those who do this . . . oppression dehumanizes the oppressor as much as, if not more than, the oppressed.” Making life hell for others has consequences.

Enter Esther.

We read just a bit of her story. It may be historical, or it may be historical fiction designed to inspire God’s people in challenging times. Either way, it is a great story. Esther was the second wife of King Ahasuerus, a powerful Persian Emperor. He ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. At the beginning of the story, he hosted a six month long banquet to show off his wealth and power. He became very drunk and called for his first wife Vashti. She refused. You can imagine why. This enraged the king and his ministers. They told the king he had to do something. Otherwise, they said, all women would look with contempt on their husbands. So the king deposed Vashti and ordered her never to come before him again. The king also sent letters to all the provinces where he ruled declaring that, and I quote here, “every man should be master in his own house.” That’s the context in which Esther’s story unfolds.

Then the king decided to find another wife. One of his advisors convinced him to sponsor a Miss Persia pageant of sorts. Beautiful young women from all the provinces would receive spa treatments for a year. At the end of the year each woman would spend a night with the king. As the advisor put it, “Let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.”

The one who pleased the king was Esther. She became queen, but she had a secret. Esther was Jewish. Many of the king’s advisors, especially an advisor named Haman, detested the Jewish people. Esther’s uncle Mordecai, who raised her after her parents died, told her to keep her secret identity secret. It was dangerous to let others know her truth.

But one day Mordecai got word that Haman was plotting genocide against the Jews. Haman had tricked the king into signing an edict that on the 14th day of . . . all Jews would be killed. Mordecai told Esther it was time to speak up on behalf of her people.

Esther struggled with whether to do this. She knew her husband had decreed “every man should be master in his own house.” She knew the king had married her for her appearance, not her interest in political affairs. She knew what happened when Vashti tried to stand up for herself.

She knew that even if she spoke up, it was likely nothing would change, and she would lose everything.

But Mordecai convinced her of her duty to speak and to try to save her people. Esther accepted her responsibility for others. In Jesus's terms she cut off her privilege and safety and comfort rather than allow others to go through hell. She stood up for her people to save them from being knocked down again.

We are thinking today about courage. The root word for courage is the French word for heart - acting from the convictions of the heart. We sometimes equate courage with bravery. The origin of the word brave is not clear, but some associate it with strength and savagery. But the classic word for this virtue is the one I like best – fortitude. Fortitude has the word fort in it. It captures that sense of protecting others. Esther was not only acting courageously from the heart and acting bravely with strength. She acted with fortitude to protect others.

Our lesson for today ends there, but what happened next in Esther is actually quite interesting. In response to Esther's testimony, the King had Haman hanged on the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai. Haman's house and wealth and position were given to Mordecai. And though the King could not withdraw the edict he had unwillingly signed, he issued another edict designed to help the Jews survive. On the day set aside for the destruction of the Jews, he allowed them instead to defend themselves, destroy their enemies, and plunder their goods.

But that's not quite what happened. According to Esther 9, "Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder."

Killing seventy-five thousand people was harsh, but in context it was an act of self-defense. It reversed the harm of the first edict. But rather than continue in the usual pattern of war and take the goods of those they defeated, God's people chose to lay no hands on the plunder. This is not a random detail. Laying no hands on the plunder was one of the rules of holy war. The scriptures tell us that at times God's people felt called to engage in violence in order to carry out God's justice. At those times, they would destroy their enemies but they would not take any of their goods so as not to profit from destruction. In this case, the king had given them freedom to carry out traditional war against their enemies. They were legally allowed to do anything they wanted. Instead, they chose holy war. They turned the crisis into a holy opportunity to carry out God's ways on earth.

Maybe the book of Esther provides a way forward for us. There are many Esthers among us, and thanks be to God for them. Women are speaking with courage and fortitude about sexual violence and harassment. People of color are speaking with courage and fortitude about the reality of racial oppression that continues to this day. Non-heterosexual folks are speaking with courage and fortitude about human dignity and the need for equal rights and equal protection. I could go on and on. The world is blessed with many Esthers. And as in the days of Esther, all of

these people are speaking in a time of deep division and at great personal cost. This takes courage.

In this time of division and reckoning, maybe we, too, can turn our wars with one another into something holy. Maybe we can defend our lives and seek relief from our enemies but take no plunder. Maybe we can seek healing for those who have been harmed and for those who did the harming so that God's ways can be known on earth.

Long after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, as South Africa entered a time of repentance and healing, Desmond Tutu was asked to lead South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Black and white South Africans confessed the harm they had received and the harm they had caused. They offered forgiveness to one another. In his book about that process, Tutu said, "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin." They turned the conversation into something holy.

Have salt among yourselves, Jesus said. Be people who preserve rather than destroy. And be at peace with one another.

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No Future without Forgiveness. Desmond MPilo Tutu. Doubleday. 2000.

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