

Back Story

The book of Esther is a fascinating story of God's people the Jews living under Persian rule as conquered people. One purpose of the book is to give hope and encouragement to the Jewish people who for so much of the time have lived under the rule of others and in exile. The Jewish feast of Purim comes from this experience. Indeed, the joke goes that Jewish holidays can be summed up in this way: "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat!"

Interestingly, the Book of Esther has no reference to God at all. It is instead a reminder to God's people living in a complex political world of God's providential care especially through willing and faithful servants. Esther, a Jewish woman, becomes the Queen of the Persian King Ahasuerus because he chooses her in a sort of Miss Persia contest after killing off his first wife, Vashti. Her uncle Mordecai, also a Jew, reminds Esther that she is marrying the king "for such a time as this."

"Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:13-14).

Queen Esther uses her position in a cunning way to save herself and her people as she is married to the enemy so to speak. There is a plot of attempted genocide by Haman, but Esther outsmarts him. We pick up our reading with chapter 7 when Esther asserts herself at a feast with the King and Haman.

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

7:1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther.

7:2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

7:3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people -- that is my request.

7:4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."

7:5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?"

7:6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

7:9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits

high." And the king said, "Hang him on that."

7:10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

9:20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far,

9:21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year,

9:22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Mark 9:38-50

9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

9:39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

9:40 Whoever is not against us is for us.

9:41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Proclamation of the Word

There is a reason the disciples in Mark's gospel are sometimes called the "Duh"ciples. They usually do not get what Jesus is saying. Mark does not always show the disciples in a flattering light. In this quick exchange we read, the disciples are fussing about an unknown exorcist doing deeds of power in Jesus name. They sound like whiney four year olds, don't they? He is not one of us they tell Jesus. We tried to stop him.

"Right from the get-go, Christians questioned those who don't worship, serve and follow Jesus in the same way they do. The examples of this are endless, truly endless," as Jill Duffield reminds us.¹ She continues,

Passing the peace, frequency of Communion, manner in which Communion is served, bread used in Communion, wine or juice, Welch's or store brand, sprinkle, immerse, adult, infant, once, multiple times, kneel, clap, children in worship, children in children's church, children in part of the service, adult beverages, who is allowed to preach, bishops, free standing congregations, robes, stoles, liturgical year, organ, guitar, screen... whatever the issue from exorcism to excommunication, disciples tend to want to stop those who don't follow us.

We even have hymns or songs that sound like we have a corner on Jesus, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine." or the praise song, "My Jesus, my Savior." As if Jesus belongs to me, to us, and not to them.

Jesus breaks down the "us and them" dichotomy. "Do not stop them. For whoever is not against us is for us." He reminds the disciples that any work of mercy done in his name is a gift. He reminds them that we are all on the same team, so to speak. No more us and them, just us.

Christians behave just like the disciples sometimes.

We can be jealous of another group of Jesus followers. We admire their facilities, their program, their robust mission work. But instead of saying, "Praise God!" we are quick to compare ourselves and feel jealous or less than.

Or another temptation which Jesus highlights is that we can believe that our way is the best way to follow Jesus. We sound just like John, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." I have encountered other Christians of other traditions who have belittled my tradition with a sort of "we are right" or "we are more faithful" attitude. And when I have done so, I pray for God's forgiveness.

Chuck overheard a conversation in the halls of Daniel high school. A boy and girl had apparently been dating. He being from an evangelical church exclaimed, "Why didn't you tell me you were catholic, I cannot date you! You have not been saved."

It's something the church of Jesus Christ has been doing since, well, Jesus walked the earth.

I don't get out much. I spend much of my time with others a lot like me. I live in my little ghetto of faith as a Presbyterian flavored Christian. Roger Nishioka used to remind us that the Church is like the ice cream shop, Baskin Robbins with 100 flavors, and we are just Presbyterian flavored Christians. A great reminder to walk humbly in your faith. Jesus' circle of friends is rich and varied.

Last weekend I had the joy of officiating at my niece Emily's wedding. There was a variety of faith traditions represented. As the token religious leader at the gathering, I found people wanted to talk about faith openly. Sort of like eating alone in a restaurant, people feel sorry for you and start up conversations with you. Frankly, it was refreshing, especially the twenty something friends of Matt, the groom, and Emily, the bride. One young woman who is a Methodist preacher's kid is now dating a young man who is Church of Christ. She was disturbed that in his family and church, they see themselves as the one, true church of Christ which grows out of the book of Acts. She was disturbed that they believe they are the only ones to be saved. Another friend and bridesmaid, has fallen away from the church, even though she grew up very active in a Presbyterian church. She had the most questions about faith and asked if we could talk by email.

Matt's family is Pentecostal. It was moving as Matt's dad stood beside me during the service, he was praying quietly throughout the service. I caught him singing and praying under his breath throughout the weekend. He was so refreshing. As Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing."

Emily's family is Presbyterian (PCA) which doesn't allow women in leadership, but they see my calling as valid and appreciate my ministry. Now Matt and Emily have the challenge of finding a church to serve and grow in as they merge their Pentecostal and Presbyterian styles although they currently attend Matt's home church.

Matt's brother in law is a pastor in New York City called church of the Apostles. He looks like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and talks passionately about how Christ changed his life after being on the fast track in business in New York City. His wife had been in the fashion industry, a cut throat industry. He talks about it being a destructive, brutal path for them and that the city is a hard place to follow Jesus.

Another young adult cousin grew up Catholic and is gay. He was so excited to talk about his faith with me. I got the impression that he was hungry to connect with God and other Christians.

Each conversation was like a cold cup of refreshing water. Jesus' circle of friends is large and varied. All of us seeking the Lord God and desiring to know that freedom, mercy, and love Jesus offers. All of us, this crazy mix of people, want to connect to God and serve authentically. Jesus told his disciples if anyone heals or casts out demons in my name, do not stop them. In fact in the next passage Jesus says do not be a stumbling block to any of these my little children. It would be better that you place a millstone around your neck and drown. Yikes!!!

It seems to me that what Jesus is saying, is that all of us have within us the power to bless others in his name. We, in Christ, can use our power to bless, to pray, to confess, to heal, to serve, to forgive, to lift up, and to do so in the name of Jesus. We have been called to follow him in serving God's life giving ways.

Esther used her power to influence the king and saved her people from genocide. Even though she never invokes the name of the Lord, she does so in service to his people. This renovation is possible because generous people are giving unselfishly in the power of Jesus' name.

This passage calls us to examine our own hearts rather than judge the faithfulness of others. Jesus calls us to be authentic, faithful disciples.

I am sure that some of you have followed the visit of Pope Francis to the United States. On Thursday, he traveled from the halls of Congress, then to eat with homeless persons, and finally to lead vespers in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Picture him entering New York in a tiny fiat surrounded by the huge SUVs. Wasn't that great? It was almost comical, like a clown car in the circus packed with people. It highlighted his humility and commitment to simplicity as well as the excesses of our culture.

Many, Catholic or not, have found him compelling. There is something honest and authentic in him that draws people to him. I think it is his bold, yet kind reminder to us all to care for the least of these, to speak on behalf of the poor of the earth, and to serve God in humility. All of us Christ followers of any flavor can serve in Jesus' name.

Because of Esther's brave request, her people were saved. Such life affirming acts are in service to God's will. The people celebrate a feast called Purim to recall God's saving mercy. They feast to remember that the Lord brought them "from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor." (Esther 9:22) Sounds a lot like what we do at Christmas, doesn't it?

Because of God's merciful love shown in the self-giving love of Jesus, we can sit down to table with others, even those who are different or with whom we disagree. We can pray for our enemies. We serve by sharing what we have with the poor and needy in thanksgiving for what the Lord has done. We have influential power when we serve in Jesus' name and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, in a broken, fearful, divided world, God needs us more than ever to remember that there is no more us and them, there is only us. We are dependent on one another, knit together, as children of the sovereign God, Creator of heaven and earth, and all who dwell in it.

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ⁱ Jill Duffield, "Looking into the Lectionary: 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time" (September 27) at the Presbyterian Outlook.org