

Be an advocate, not an oppressor

Esther 7: 1-10, 9:20-22 and Mark 9: 42-50

I want to start by sharing a portion of a prayer from the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr. It says:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can
and wisdom to know the difference.

This prayer has been a cornerstone for many people who are seeking to make changes in their lives, who are seeking courage, who are seeking strength and direction. It's helped people who live with addictions, it's helped people who live with chronic pain, people who face violence and many others who face difficult choices in their lives. And for some of us it is there as a constant reminder to seek peace, to seek wisdom in times of challenge. The story of Esther is a story of a woman of great courage and faith. Courage lived in the face of persecution. It's the story of a family standing up together in the face of a bully, a person who was seeking power for themselves. "The book of Esther celebrates the escape of the Jewish community from genocide under the Persian empire."¹

As we come to the conclusion of our theme called Holy Pieces which is what we have been exploring for this whole month we need to ask ourselves; how will we hold each other accountable in living out our holy manners? How will we help each others stay on track with our mission that is being given to us from God? How will we maintain that spirit of friendship and belonging, joy and justice so that we don't fall into that negative spirit? And how will we continue to widen our circle so then there is a place for all people here where are people feel that they belong and are valued and are important to what we are doing? And what happens when we fail? What happens when we break our promises to each other or get caught up in our own desires like Haman did? What happens when we treat each other badly over and over again causing pain and hurt?

The gospel lesson today ends with the statement have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another. After the rather harsh statements about removing a hand or a foot so that we are not a

¹ Kathleen M O'Connor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p. 99.

stumbling block, “Jesus talked about the ‘salt’ of the disciples, the qualities that would preserve and enhance their community.”² Harry Adams a theologian writes,

*‘the church community is bound together, not just by common interest or mutual enjoyment, but by convictions about the fundamental issues of human existence: What we believe most deeply, what gives value and meaning to our existence, under what obligations we live, how we define and achieve the good life and who we are. It is said that is strong community enhances the lives of its members.’*³

In the story of Esther is given power by King Ahasuerus his invitation when he asked her what it is she wanted. Esther like Haman is faced with a choice; will she use the power that the King is giving her for the common good, will she respond in a faithful way or will she like Haman be driven by the desire for more power, be driven by the desire to be honoured to have others look up to him and bow down to him so that he is served, or in his case his ego is served. Though God is never once actually mentioned in this particular book of the Bible it's clear that God is present all along. Mordecai stay true to his faith when he refused to bow down to anyone but God. He would not worship the King, the Prime Minister; he worshipped God and God alone. In the end Esther also held on her identity and proclaimed that she too was Jewish, and her call too was from God. She asked only that the King let her, and her people live. Esther found the courage to change the things she could, to stand up in the face of an oppressor.

Now in order to live out our call faithfully in the community we need to acknowledge the times when we fail, we need to identify what our stumbling blocks are, and how are we a stumbling block to someone else in our community. Because like schools and workplaces and other gatherings of people together there is bullying. You might be surprised to see how many blogs have been written about church bullies. We want to believe that the church is a place where everyone is on their best behaviour, and yet that's not always the case. We're human. We make mistakes and sometimes we do it with the wrong intentions. So, the questions today are again how we are going to help each other live out our holy manners, stay true to our mission, do it in a spirit that is open and welcoming, inclusive; providing space for all people to belong.

So, the Board has created our anti-bullying statement as is a preventative measure. We do fire drills so that we are prepared for when a fire comes. We've created this statement of anti-bullying so that we are all clear about what we mean by behaviour that is unacceptable and bullying in nature. We want to know that we have something that will help us to learn from our mistakes. It's a document that is there to support us all in becoming better people and living in a way that God wants us to. The reality is we all need to work on our communication. We don't all communicate the same way, but we have to find a way to communicate directly with people. We need to stop triangulating with each other, talking to everyone else but the person that has hurt us or bothered us. We need to talk directly, we need to talk openly and honestly trusting that we are people of

² Harry D. Adams, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p. 120.

³ _____, p. 118.

faith and therefore we offer grace, we offer forgiveness and we offer unconditional love. As faithful people we're not here to shame, we are not here to seek revenge, we are here to reconcile and make new as Jesus has called us to do. And we do that by being present to one another in a kind, open and honest way. And we need to challenge each other, we need to support each other, like Mortdecai did with Esther. When Leigh and I have a moment where one of us maybe doesn't speak the way we should, hopefully the other person will say, "You might want to rephrase that. It wasn't in the kindest manner."

We all need to help one another it's like exercising, it's like getting healthy lifestyle instead of a diet. You need people to support you and encourage you and remind you when your going off the path. So, let's be agents of truth, support, and courage to one another. Let's put all of those holy pieces together and live in the way that God has called us to. Let's live a life that is worthy of the calling from God. For this we give God thanks. Amen.