

God sees you, we see you, you are loved!

Esther; Mark 9:38-50

For the past several weeks, we have been trying to get back to basics and really learning about why it is we do what we do. Why do we have faith? Why are we a community of faith? What are we called to do and why do we worship? Today is no different. Today, the question is, what makes a community of faith different from a community? Is there a difference?

I think that often what makes it different is what the community values and believes. Harry Adams, who is a theologian, writes the following. He says:

“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, and under what obligations we live. How we define and achieve the good life, who we are – that is what makes a faith community different.”

To take this one step further, a strong community – a strong community of faith – is one that enhances the lives of its members. How is it that Robertson-Wesley and all of us together have enhanced your life? What are the convictions that we hold as a community of faith, and how do we live that out in the world?

As most of you know, at Robertson-Wesley, we value our *Statement of Welcome and Inclusion*. Sometimes when people come from other faith traditions and visit and join us here, there can be some friction, and sometimes there are some comments and things that people share with me about their understanding versus what I might have preached on, for example. The challenge in these moments is how do we welcome and include, while holding on to our identity? How do we remain open to other thoughts and beliefs and ideas that people have, who have come from a different tradition? For I truly believe that we are all

seeking the same thing and trying to get to the same place, but we need to learn to listen more openly to one another.

The story of Esther, I think, is an example of this very challenge. This is the story of great courage lived out in the face of persecution. It is the story of a family standing up together in the face of a bully. The horrible Haman: a person who was seeking power for themselves. The Book of Esther celebrates the escape of a Jewish community from genocide under the Persian empire. It was Mordecai – Esther's uncle – who told her not to reveal that she was Jewish, so that she could find favour with the king. Esther's beauty and her humbleness did win the favour of King Ahasuerus. And King Ahasuerus took Esther as his new queen. I wonder: how many of you have ever had to hide who you are to be part of a community? Have you ever found yourself living in a community where your life would be at risk if you were to be your authentic self? I would hazard a guess, if I looked around right now, there are many in our midst who are very familiar with this feeling.

Throughout history, Christians have been persecuted, and sadly, Christians have also persecuted others. What we can learn from the story of Esther today is the importance of courage and conviction. Where one's faith can help us stand in the face of oppression. And hopefully not repeat the same kind of tyranny on other people. Esther, as we know, was valued for her beauty, not her brains – an oversight on Haman's part. She was a young woman who was willing to risk her own safety and security for the well-being of her people. She valued the lives and wellbeing of her faith community – so much so that she was willing to risk it all to save them. To enhance their lives. As a community of faith, how do we stay strong and risk our own safety and security while looking out for the wellbeing of those who have been oppressed and persecuted? How do we ensure that people are able to be themselves, so that they do not need to hide? How do we help each other be our authentic selves, and not cause somebody to hide that? I think that we need to take some time to do self-reflection, and also discernment as a community of faith.

Harry Adams also wrote that we need to ponder the risks for us if our failures to love or our distortions of the way of Christ are a too narrow understanding of the truth, and our quickness to pronounce judgement, causing others to stumble as they are trying to find the way of faithful living. We need to make sure that our own convictions do not cause others to stumble. Jesus said, "Have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another." What Jesus means by this is that the salt of

the disciples – the salt of all of you – are the qualities that will preserve and enhance this community. So instead of casting out, we need to lift up all the saltiness in our midst. So that we can preserve what it is that we value, so we can live out our faith in the world with conviction, with bravery, with courage, with love. We are being called today, reminded by Esther, to be humble in heart. We are being called to think before we speak. Ask yourself again – remember those gates that I mentioned about a month ago: “In what I am about to say, is it kind, is it true, and is it necessary?” We are being called to give of ourselves to others; to not hide it. To share what it is that we have been given, and we need to be at peace with one another. That’s what we’re seeking, is peace.

So on this day of Worldwide Communion, where Christians around the world are joining in the sacrament that Jesus taught the disciples and asked us to do in remembrance of him, let us learn to respect our diverse understandings of who God is, and how God is at work in our lives and in this world. May we carefully consider our intentions behind our statements of who we believe Jesus is, especially if we are trying to teach or correct another Christian. May we learn to stand with all people of faith who proclaim God’s name, and may we trust that in doing so, we are known. That we are loved and we are seen. That we are God’s. And may our actions reflect these beliefs.

What makes us strong is our compassion and our ability to stand together for a just world. How will we do that today? How will the story of Esther encourage you to stand up? To face the hard things in our life so that we can make a difference? We started today by saying, “Go make a difference in this world”, and that is what God is calling us to do today. For that we give God thanks. Amen.