

JUNE 9, 2024

# *Marion* weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

May 26 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Esther’ Esther 2:15-18, Esther 5:1-8

This week we have neither hero nor villain. We have a heroine. Esther is one of the more popular women in the Bible and her story has a lot to teach us.

Before the story itself, the book has an interesting trivia piece. It never expressly mentions God. Yet we can see God at work all through the book. In this is an initial takeaway. Some have the perspective that it doesn't count as ministry unless God's or Jesus' name are stamped all over it. Hyperspiritual talking is how we get people to believe and understand our faith. Unfortunately to many we are hoping to persuade this is off-putting. It sounds phony or like a sales pitch or to some even cultish. Overdoing it becomes a detriment rather than a help. What people are curious about isn't what we can say but if we are modeling Jesus. Can they tell we belong to Him even if we never mention His name?

No of course I'm not saying we don't talk about God and Jesus. That's part of who we are. It's more recognizing that part of what makes anything we say along those lines hearable is if the one saying it displays faith genuinely in their life. There was a very successful pastor in Korea who had advice for his rather large church. “Before mentioning Jesus make sure you've done three loving things for the person first,” This is what he was getting at. Lead by example and then humbly offer the reason we live as we do.

In the Persian Empire the Jews had been scattered. The king was throwing a large party with guests of all classes and dignitaries and rulers from every province in the empire. After he'd been drinking quite a bit he wanted to show off his wife to some prominent folks. She was throwing her own party for the women at the time. When he summoned her she refused. The men went into a fit figuring that if word got out that the queen had refused a summons from the king without punishment there would be uppity women all over the empire. So they tasked the king with punishing her. He did. He decreed she would never again be in his presence and then took to their encouragement to search and find a woman who was “better than she”.

The king sent people out to the ends of the empire seeking the most beautiful virgins for the king to pick from. After a lengthy process and many auditions one woman pleased him more than any other. This was Esther. She was to become the new queen. She was also Jewish. Her cousin Mordecai had raised her. He advised her to keep her Jewish identity a secret, which Esther did. Something that is noteworthy about the king was that while if summoned a person better come quick, if someone came before the king not summoned the penalty was death. Death unless. If the king was alright with whomever approached he would extend his scepter as a sign that they were welcome.

Mordecai at one point overhears an assassination plot against the king and reports it, sparing the king's life. There is no reward or honor for this act of loyalty, at least not yet.

Another man Haman had been elevated to a high position in the court. The position was to the degree that people were required to bow before him. Everyone did except Mordecai. We don't know why. When asked he simply kept silent. I might suggest that perhaps if he was a devout Jew he was refusing to bend the knee to anyone but God. Whatever the reason his continued unwillingness to bow to Haman drove Haman into a rage. His rage was so great that he manipulated the king to send out an order to ensure not only Mordecai's death but the death of all his people. Haman had found that Mordecai was a Jew and an order went out through the empire that on a certain day all the Jews were to be slaughtered.

When Esther hears this she is asked to intercede with the king. The problem? She would have to risk going to the throne unsummoned. She develops a plot to throw Haman under the bus. It involves inviting both the king and Haman to a dinner she would arrange. Her plan was to out Haman as the man who plotted to kill the king's queen and all her people. She goes before the king who is favorable and is pleased at her invitation.

That night the king can't sleep and what does he try to get drowsy? He begins to read the more current annals where he comes across Mordecai's help in foiling his assassination. Upset he'd never honored Mordecai he asks Haman what he should do to honor someone who he favors. Thinking the king mean himself Haman offered up a lavish way of honoring the person including parading him through the streets praising him. In an infuriating and ironic turn this is how the king honors Mordecai with Haman being the one to lead him around praising him.

All out of sorts Haman and the king go to Esther's dinner and Haman is outed. The king storms away and when he returns Haman is all up close to Esther pleading with her. The king assumes Haman is trying to force himself on her. He is quickly taken away and killed by the same means he had intended to kill Mordecai. The king reversed the decree for the Jews to be killed. There is a bit more to the story but this will suffice. Through Esther, the Jews were spared annihilation.

There's much to learn from her story.

Sometimes we think we're in the wrong place, a bad place, or the place we don't want to be. Yet we are exactly where we NEED to be. It may be for ourselves, it may be for others, or it may be both. Esther was not in an ideal place. She didn't ask to be brought before the king, she was taken. She didn't ask to marry the king, she was told. She couldn't go to him as she pleased even after they were married, she had to be summoned. If she went to see him out of turn she risked her life. This isn't a wonderful place to be. She was terrified when she had to go in to speak with the king so much that she called on Mordecai to spread word through the Jews to pray and fast for her.

Despite all of this, it was Esther that saved her people. No one else could have had the king's ear as she did. No one else had his favor to put Haman in the hot seat the way she did. For all the problematic that got her there, she was the one woman who would spare the Jews from extinction.

I remember a much less dire experience in my own life. I had had it with the United Methodist Church because of some issues dealing with the clergy and DS where I was doing ministry at the time. I said I'd never have anything to do with the UMC again as I started looking for work back in the group home system. I went for an interview and as I pulled up to the administration building what did I see? A giant cross and flame. I nearly turned around and just drove off. I felt like I was jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. I went in anyway. Of course God in God's sense of humor, that's where I landed the job. Unbeknownst to me the chaplain was soon to be on his way out the door and I would be asked to fill the spot. We took the Spiritual Life program to heights it had never gone. It was also where I got the call to congregational ministry and entered seminary. It wasn't where I wanted to be. I got there through some very difficult circumstances. Yet for many reasons it turned out it was exactly where I needed to be.

Find courage. Esther had to dig into deep reservoirs of courage to walk before the king. She was literally taking her life in her hands. She knew what happened to the last queen for daring to NOT come. What could happen if he was in a foul mood when Esther showed up unrequested? For her part, what she had to say was of critical importance. Oddly she chose the less certainly deadly one. Silence meant she would definitely die. Speaking up risked it, but had the potential to spare her. Not only her, but all her people as well. Thank goodness she did.

Most of us aren't faced with such life and death decisions. Each of us has been and will be faced with times where we know something is wrong and have the chance to speak out against it. It may be something along the lines of a social ill, it might be someone being mistreated, it might be on behalf of another, advocating for them in the face of unfairness and ignorance. Do we do it? I know there are many times that I have not, though I hope I'm getting better about finding the courage in those situations.

We don't speak up many times because of fear. Not even fear of death like Esther had. What if I make the person angry? What if other people don't like what I'm standing up for? How will people see me differently if I voice my thoughts? There are always consequences to speaking up and speaking out. There are also consequences for not doing so. Sometimes the consequences fall on others,

sometimes on ourselves. When we raise our voice, what always must accompany it as people of faith is to do so with the spirit of Christ. We do it for the right reasons, in the right fashion, seeking to do good while intentionally steering clear of doing harm. One of the greatest barriers to the conversations that change wrong to right comes when we forget about the not doing harm aspect. We know what speaking up offered with vitriol and disrespect achieves, nothing. Or it makes matters worse. We have the great privilege of showing the world what good and godly conversation and lifting our voice for the good of all can and should look like.

Always be patient, always be kind, and stay humble. Why? Well, first because it's correct. But from Esther's story because you never fully know who you might be dealing with. Haman had no idea Esther was Jewish. He had no idea he was plotting to kill the queen. In the end this was his downfall. The king's regard for his queen was above his regard for Haman and it cost Haman his life.

We know about this here in Marion. There are so many people connected in so many ways, many through birth or marriage. Speaking with someone we know little about and running at the mouth about someone may well be talking about their family or some more distant relation. It might be talking about a friend or business associate. One never knows. And if the talk is bad there may be offense after offense given.

This applies even broader and can affect our witness. There are all kinds of one liners, jokes, and off hand comments about "other people". Pick your group of folks that someone has an issue with. Comments fly freely with no thought that one of the people being mocked or devalued might be right in front of us. A loved one of someone in that population could be in earshot. In that moment they are repelled from Christ rather than drawn to Him because one of His representatives has just displayed not only a hateful attitude, but hate towards them as an individual or someone they cherish.

We might not meet with the demise of Haman, but we can cause great hurt. So speak thoughtfully, graciously, and always in love.

Esther's example is one of fortitude and intentionality. Faith helps us to maintain composure and focus even in the midst of circumstances that are hard, uncomfortable, and even downright bad. We trust that God will lead us to whatever role we have to play in bringing light into that darkness. We speak with care and grace. Not because we have an angle. Simply because it is correct. Tearing others down is never the way to build a strong foundation for positive change. This sets the tone of our own personal witness so that when we do find the courage to speak out on behalf of those around us we are taken seriously. Our witness is the witness of the grace, light, and love of Christ. In that witness and as we follow it out in all we say and do there is no reason to dismiss us out of hand. Because our lives and living have shown that what we're about is the uplifting of all to build the Kingdom of God. This is a Kingdom of peace.

If you're anything like me as I've gotten older...but not yet old... all you want in the world is peace. Let all the nonsense stop so we can love one another differences and all, and live in peace. So as we often say when we shake hands in worship. Peace be with you.