

Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in God's sight. In the name of God. Amen.

## I.

Can a good woman find a fruitful place in this depraved, conniving and confining world?<sup>1</sup> Indeed, she can. Our Hebrew Scripture story for today is about such a woman, Esther. We first meet Esther as a orphaned cousin of an exiled people in a far-flung province of a shaken empire, when she is snatched away from her former life to be a pagan emperor's plaything.

Purportedly, a beautiful woman in a man's world, Esther rises in royal favor and becomes the Jewish queen of Persia. She bravely uses her wit to save her people from the evil schemes of the king's advisor. As a result, Purim, an annual feast day on the 14<sup>th</sup> month of Adar on the Jewish calendar and February or March on the Gregorian calendar, is declared for the Jews to celebrate God's deliverance from destruction.

Amidst the bright noise of celebration, there are deafening shadows of the rest of Esther's story. Esther is chosen queen from among the beautiful young virgins of the empire after first having spent a year in the harem undergoing training and instruction to make her suitable for a king, a year during which she is cared for by eunuchs, male servants castrated as children.

Esther becomes queen only after the former queen, Vashti, is dismissed by the king and returns in disgrace to the harem because once (once!) she refuses to come when she is called. Her example of wifely dishonor cannot go unpunished for the sake of all the men in the kingdom.

The deliverance of the Jews celebrated in Esther includes the wholesale slaughter by the Jews of all those in the Persian Empire who hate them. There is also a memory of all the times in the Hebrew Scriptures and in history when the Jews are not delivered by God from their enemies and how it must feel to be defeated when your theology puts God on the side of the victor.

## II.

And then there is Mark. Ask a hundred people to identify their favorite Bible passage, and it is unlikely one of them will mention this week's gospel.

*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to be thrown into hell. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

Obviously, Jesus is not talking about literal amputation: plucking out eyes, removing tongues, cutting off hands and amputating one's feet.

I suspect Jesus is talking more about that which blocks one from the fullness of life. Stumbling blocks are serious and deadly to growth. Jesus' tolerance for those not of his following is astonishing for his troubled times. But it is more than just tolerance.

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<sup>1</sup> Telford Work. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 4.* "Proper 21 (Sunday Between September 25 and October 1 inclusive).. Esther. A Theological Perspective." (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 98-102.

Jesus knows that we often stumble ourselves – judging those who are not like us, not acting for the good of the whole but only for our part of it.

When Jesus talks about cutting off parts of the body, he means anything that stands in the way of our being in right relationship with God, with our selves or with one another. In other words, *anything that gets in the way of doing the work of the kingdom – like deciding that God cannot call unexpected people to join the labor force.*<sup>2</sup>

### III.

When he discovers somebody is healing in Jesus' name, John gets upset. *Teacher*, he says, *we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he is not following us.* We are not told the person's name, but whoever it is that somebody is not part of the inner circle. *It is human nature to draw boundaries, but it is not the best of our human nature.*

As Americans, for example, we are conditioned to constantly compare ourselves to those who have more and those who have less. The haves and the have nots. Consumerism causes us to have blurred vision concerning our needs and our wants and our desires. John's reaction is not an unknown in the Episcopal Church either. We can get pretty uppity about refusing to recognize God at work in unexpected ways.

A change in the prayer book, for instance, the church's stand on divorce, the public's view of interracial marriage, women's ordination, the ordination of a gay bishop, the marriage of same sex couples. Not so very long ago, most Episcopalians thought black people could not be full and equal members of this church.

All this means, though, is that all too often like the people of Israel, we complain when things do not go our way. The problem, however, is not with God. The problem is our own fear and lack of trust, our inability as individuals, churches, and societies to live by faith, to recognize that Christ's coming puts us in relationship with God and each other.

All authentic spirituality, in fact, is about making connections with others – all others – people from different ethnic backgrounds, different religious traditions and different personal convictions. Our relationships are one of the most significant aspects of what it means to be human – the giving and receiving of friendship, the presence of those who challenge our biases and call us to new life.

Those who nurture our souls and our bodies. Those are the places, where for most of us, God lives, where we see the working of God's love.

### IV.

Some would say that God's eternal truth is somehow reflected in the social position of women in the Persian Empire and of eunuchs who survive the agony of their bloody metamorphosis, while others believe that God holds every age accountable for its particular injustices, including our own.

Some would say that God continually acts and intercedes in human history as part of a divine strategic plan that has been in place since before creation, while still others believe that God relies upon our hands and hearts to bring God's will to bear.

Christian worship is filled with profound actions: heads bowed in prayer, arms raised in praise, standing in reverence during a Scripture reading, coming forward to give an offering, kneeling during communion with mouths open or hands stretched out to receive the Eucharist. One ancient and significant gesture in worship is the passing of the peace.

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<sup>2</sup> The above paraphrased from a sermon by The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, Proper 21B, September 27, 2009.

Passing the peace is a tradition rooted in Scripture that embodies our identity as peacemakers (Matt. 5:9; 2 Cor. 5:20).

The gesture is simple, but the meaning is profound. When we extend our hand to another, we identify with Jesus, who extended his life to the point of death to make peace with humanity (Col. 1:20-21). What's more, in the midst of divisions we symbolize our unity through handshakes and hugs (Eph. 2:14-21). Likewise, when we regularly pass the peace we practice God's call to make every effort to maintain the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Passing the peace is sacramental. It is an outward and visible sign of what Mark describes as having enough salt in ourselves and allowing the inward and spiritual grace of Christ to train our hearts, hands and tongues in the ways of becoming at peace with one another and more nearly the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of the Psalmist may we be cleansed from our secret thoughts and may all the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in God's sight. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathy L. Dawson. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Volume 4.* "Proper 18 (Sunday Between September 4 and September 10 inclusive). James, A Pastoral Perspective." (Louisville, Westminster, 2011) 110-114.