

Hillcrest Congregational United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
September 27, 2009
When Royalty Becomes Salt
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22, Mark 9:38-50

Today we started with a reading from the Hebrew Testament that only touches on the rich story behind it. Esther's story- we only get 9 verses but this is another one of those salacious stories. People who don't read the Bible might think it is a boring list of rules and moral lessons. But we keep coming up on stories that are something that could have been written in the Soap Opera Digest. The story of Esther's rise to royalty and preservation of her people is one of wealth, egos, marital conflict, a harem, conspiracy, palace intrigue, rivalry, treason, revenge, and also a little bit of being in the right place at the right time. Divine Serendipity.

The story begins with a falling out between the king and his current queen- the king calls her to attend his party so he can put her on display. Queen Vashti refuses- she isn't his toy! The king divorces her and a contest is set up to create a harem so he can choose her successor.

Esther, an orphan was raised by her cousin Mor'decai. They were faithful Jews, living as captives. Esther was beautiful and was taken to become part of the king's harem. For Esther it this was dangerous. No one refused the king, especially a woman, but Esther came from a captive people, not one a king would associate with. Her own people would see this as conspiring with the enemy and turning her back on God. Mor'decai told her not to tell anyone who she was, and he made sure the Jews did not know she was in the harem.

A couple of good things do happen. First, the king chooses Esther to become his queen- royalty. Second, Mor'decai hears about some men conspiring to kill the king. He tells Esther, the plot is foiled and the king's life is spared.

But then, the king appoints a man named Haman as his right hand man. When Haman learns that Mor'decai, a Jew, refuses to bow down to Haman, he is infuriated. In his vengeance Haman plots to destroy all of the Jews. He convinces the king that a group of people are disloyal to the king. He offers to get rid the "problem" and even gives the king money to pay for it!

A proclamation announcing the date of the extermination goes out and all the Jews, including Esther learn of it. Esther does not know what to do. If she goes to the king without being summoned, her life will be forfeit. But Mor'decai reminds her that even in the king's palace she, a Jew will not be safe. He says that if she remains silent at such a time as this, the Jews will still be preserved, but she will perish.

This is when things come to a head. For such a time as this, Esther was placed in the right place and role. She knows that she cannot approach the king directly about this. But she stokes up her courage, asks for the people's prayers, and takes the risk. Thankfully the king does acknowledge her and Esther offers to throw some banquets for the king and Haman.

In spite of being feted by the Queen, Haman can still think of nothing but revenge against Mor'decai and the Jews. But the king also finds out that Mor'decai foiled a plot against his life and decides to reward Mor'decai. The king calls Haman and asks for his opinion on how to reward a faithful servant. Haman thinks the king is talking about himself and of course gives the king advice about a lavish reward. The king says, "that is a great idea Haman- go and do all those things for Mor'decai!" Haman is really mad now!

Esther throws another party for the king and Haman. And she takes a big step. She comes out to the king and admits to being one of the people that is under order of execution. After being so well treated by Esther, the king is enraged and wants to know who has threatened his queen and her people. He learns, that not only was Haman going to kill the queen, he was

also going to execute Mor'decai- the man who saved the king's life. Now the tables are turned and Haman is executed. Mor'decai lets all the Jews know, and they celebrate their preservation.

For such a time as this- one lesson from this story is that someone can be born, prepared, and placed in exactly the right place and time for God's purposes. Haman rises to power and uses it for his own aggrandizement and revenge. Esther uses it for God's purpose- the preservation of God's people. She exercises courage and risks her own life by "coming out" as one of them.

In this story, "God's [preservation] of the people is not accomplished through amazing, miraculous events but through the actions of flawed but courageous human beings who were probably never sure they were doing the right thing."¹ No one is a self-made person. God, our families, our friends, and dumb good luck have brought us to this place and time. We are always challenged to think about how we use the power we have, how we as flawed human beings can still be courageous and make a difference, in such a time as this.

Kate Huey, a UCC pastor points out a second lesson. She believes this is an example of how we must fight against assimilation. There are times when we must stand up for who we are and not bow to the society around us.² Esther became royalty but she lived by a standard, she did not forget who she was or who she belonged to. We too need to look at who we are, and whose we are. If we belong to God, if we are disciples of Jesus, our lives are defined by a different standard than that of the world.

In Jesus' lesson today, he gives the disciples a standard. Jesus has just told them in verse 37, whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and not just me, but God. We know that disciples have missed Jesus' point when he says whoever. John admits to Jesus they told

¹ Kate Huey, "Courage for Community, Weekly Seeds, www.i.ucc.org

² Kate Huey, "Courage for Community, Weekly Seeds, www.i.ucc.org

whoever to stop helping others because they are not part of their group. Jesus tells them that whoever is doing what is right is not going to turn around and speak evil. So stop judging whoever is in and whoever is out. When Jesus tells the disciples whoever, he does not mean our group or whoever you approve of. Jesus draws a wide circle, he includes whoever “in my name.”

One commentary notes, ““In my name” does **NOT** mean simply a mechanical and literal speaking of Jesus' name. “In my name” means “aligned with/loyal to/bonded with Jesus' honor /status/mission and thereby also with the honour / status / mission of the One who sent him.”” Jesus calls us to live in world that is **NOT** us-and-them. He calls us to live in a world that is us-and-those-who-are-not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God's-love-for-the-world.”³

Some of you know that my doctorate is in interfaith relations. A woman asked me about my experience the other day. She asked, “In which of three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Christianity and Judaism), do you find people who are least tolerant of people in the other faiths?” Now that is not really a fair question, because although I do spend time with people from other faiths, I have spent most of my time with Christians. When I am with people from other faiths it is usually in an interfaith context. They are already not only tolerant, but accepting or they would not be there. So if I have to answer, I find most intolerance among Christians- “us.”

I also have a friend who is also a pastor. She thought that she was among “us” but experiences a double dose of intolerance from Christians; among Euro- Americans because she is a Latina, and among Latinos because she is a woman pastor. I have found who we might think

³ David Ewart, www.holytextures.com, 9/16/09

is “us” is not always “us,” and sometimes it is preferable to be with those who-are-not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God's-love-for-the-world.

Our Esther story today tells the origin of the Jewish holy day of Purim. Last week the Muslim observance of Ramadan ended and the Jewish High Holy Days began, so I pulled information for the Adult Study class on these holy days. There are several things we found in common with our Lenten tradition; a time of repentance and reconnection with God, study of scripture, prayer, and even self-denial and fasting. But the thing that touched me about the Muslim and Jewish traditions was giving to the poor and reconnecting with each other,

Jesus talked about this connection with others and he told his disciples to have salt within them selves and be at peace with each other. When we salt food we season it, food with no seasoning has no flavor, it is flat and useless. Being salted can also mean preserved. "Have salt/seasoning in yourselves, and be at peace with one another," might plausibly be heard as: Let these words of be salt [let my standard be] within you, and be at peace [and be preservers of peace] with everyone, especially whoever is aligned with God's love for the world.⁴ I think that would include our Christian, as well as our Muslim, Jewish, Navajo, Hopi, Hindu, and other brothers and sisters who-are-not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God's-love-for-the-world.

In a desperate time, Esther, a Queen, became the salt- the preservation of her people. We who are also members of God’s royal family have been called for such a time as this; to become the salt, the preservation of God’s people- us and those who-are-not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God’s-love-for-the-world. May we be at peace with each other. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ David Ewart, www.holytextures.com, 9/16/09