

'God's Unlikely Instruments'
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Hollis Congregational Church
Proper 21B
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
Mark 9:38-50
27 September, 2015

Prayer: Creator of all, you have created us with the potential and the freedom to be instruments of beauty, and instruments of destruction in your world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts participate in the strengthening and enhancement of your world. Amen

In Frederick Buechner's Book, *Peculiar Treasures*, he retells Esther's 9 ½ - chapter story in a couple of paragraphs. Here's what he says:

King Xerxes of Persia, otherwise known as Ahasuerus, has the distinction of being the only person in the Bible whose name begins with an X. There's not much else you can say for him. He was a blow-hard and a show-off, and anybody with an eighth-grade education could wrap him around his little finger without half trying. Or her little finger.

There was Haman, for example. Haman was Xerxes' right-hand man and a raging anti-Semite. There was also a Jew named Mordecai, who lived in the capital, and one day when Haman came prancing by, Mordecai refused to flatten himself out and grovel in the dust like everybody else. It was the break Haman had been waiting for. He told Xerxes about Mordecai's insubordination and rudeness and said it was a vivid illustration of how the Jews as a whole were a miserable lot. He said if you let one of them in, they brought their friends, and Persia was crawling with them. He said the only laws they respected were their own, and it was obvious they didn't give a hoot in Hell about the king or anybody else. He then said that as far as he was concerned, the only thing to do was exterminate the whole pack of them like rats and offered the king ten thousand of the best for the privilege of organizing the operation. Xerxes pocketed the cash and told him to go ahead.

But then there was also Queen Esther, a good-looking Jewish girl who was both a cousin of Mordecai's and Xerxes' second wife. As soon as she got wind of what Haman was up to, she decided to do what she could to save her people from the gas-chamber. Xerxes had a rather short fuse, and you had to know how to handle him, but she planned her strategy carefully, and by the time she was through, she'd not only talked him out of letting the Jews get exterminated but had gotten him to hang Haman from the same gallows that had been set up for Mordecai. She even managed to persuade Xerxes to give Mordecai Haman's old job.¹

How about that? Little orphan Esther, whose Jewish kinfolk had been conquered by Persia in their Imperial conquest, becomes the King's favourite. In the scheme of things, she was as unlikely a character to become Queen of Persia as anyone. Her cousin Mordecai, who had adopted and raised her, was a thoughtful, socially-aware sort of person. He recognized the apparent serendipity of the situation, and he helped Esther to embrace her opportunities to save first the King, and then the Jewish people.

Mordecai worked at the citadel in Susa, and in his work there, he heard a lot of the political gossip. We get the picture that he was perceived as an innocuous sort of fellow amongst the employees, known and trusted by everyone. But they must not have known much about his personal life. Certainly, they didn't seem to be aware that Esther was his cousin. He was regarded with a combination of bemusement and admiration by others, because he refused to bow to Haman. Haman had recently become promoted to the position of King Xerxes' right-hand man, and that's probably because he had an air of confidence, self-importance, and command that impressed the King (who, as Buechner already described, was not the brightest bulb in the box). Once in post, Haman demanded that he should be treated more or less as royalty, being the right-hand-man he now was to the King.

But Mordecai refused to bow to any person. That's because, although he was far from his Jewish homeland and people, his family having been forcibly re-settled after the war (the Persians didn't want the Israelites to regroup and mount a counter-offensive, so they broke up families and communities, scattering them widely across the Persian Empire), Mordecai nonetheless

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, as quoted at: <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-xerxes-esther-haman-and-mordecai>

stayed faithful to the Jewish commandment that worship is reserved for God and no other.

As for Esther, she appears to have kept any religious convictions she held to herself; certainly, she didn't hold strictly to Jewish law or practice in a way that drew attention to herself or made anyone in the royal court ask questions about her religious identity.

Self-important Haman obviously had no clue about Esther's Jewish roots, much less of her relationship to Mordecai. What Haman *does* know is that he's not getting the sort of respect he feels entitled to from Mordecai, whose Jewishness *is* known. And Haman has learned enough about the Jewish religion to know that no other faithful Jew will bow to him either. And so, Haman conspires to have not just Moredcai, but *all* the Jewish people in Persia killed and plundered—and he offers the King a pretty price for the pleasure of indulging his anti-Semitic prejudice.

It's a fascinating story about how tables can get turned, and how quickly the great (or presumed great) self-promoters can be brought low when the truth of their misguided sense of entitlement, superiority, or self-importance is revealed. It's often noted that God's name is not mentioned even once as a character or guiding force in this story. But God is clearly present in the reversal of fortunes—where the weak and the voiceless ultimately triumph, especially as individuals remain faithful to the Godly virtue of looking out for the well-being of others, especially the less-fortunate and vulnerable. In terms of narratives, it's satisfying insofar as the “bad guy” who plots to destroy the people of God is the recipient of poetic justice, and winds up hanging by the gallows he'd prepared for the ostensible “good guy.” But there's more to the story, and I'll come back to that in a little bit.

In our second scripture reading, the disciples of Jesus ironically become the ones who threaten to undermine God's work of salvation and healing being done. Thinking they'd done Jesus a favor, John reported, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). In other words, “The demon-caster isn't in our little group, learning along with all of us, and doing things according to our protocol. We tried to make it clear he wasn't one of us.’

In our lesson last week, we heard about how Jesus invited a little child into the middle of their huddle and said, “This is the type of person who is going to be getting my work done—if you welcome someone like this, you’re welcoming me—more than just me, in fact, you’re welcoming God.” It’s always the ones we don’t expect that God chooses to use as instruments and examples of what’s possible in the divine scheme of things.

It’s ironic that the disciples should be trying to filter out who would be good enough to perform holy work in Jesus’ name—because so many of the disciples would probably have been considered unlikely characters themselves, before Jesus chose them. Many of them were fishermen from Bethsaida. They worked the Sea of Galilee. It was hardly work that would have made them powerful or influential figures in the town (except, I imagine, if smell counted for anything). One of them, Matthew, was purportedly a tax collector—and tax collectors were dubious characters at best, whose reputations and the esteem with which they were regarded were about as mixed and complex as today’s high-flying corporate bankers are.

Jesus’ response is unequivocal: “Don’t stop him! No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath speak evil of me. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally” (Mark 9:39). He then proceeds to warn the disciples to watch their own behaviors more closely than that of others, and to be more attentive to perfecting themselves than to noticing how imperfect their neighbors are.

The lesson (or at least one of the lessons!) in both of our scripture texts seems clear: We need to be aware and careful of our own capacity to thwart God’s work by presuming we know what type of person might or may not be capable of accomplishing divine work. If we’re not careful, we can get in the way of God’s work being done by refusing to mix with certain people. Or, we can stifle God’s ability to work by suspecting that those who engage the world differently, whose understanding and practice of faithful relationship with God is quite unlike our own, are somehow incapable of doing God’s work as well as we are.

Conversely, we can also inhibit God’s work from its full effectiveness by reckoning that God could never use the likes of *us* to accomplish anything of much value. Imagine if the first disciples had determined that God couldn’t use mere fishermen, or that the complicated moral and social character of a tax

collector was beyond God's ability to work through for good and holy ends. (Which of us, after all, doesn't have a complicated moral or social character?)

Finally, as surely as we need to be careful about suspecting that certain others couldn't possibly be on God's side, we need to be careful about presuming everything we do *does* represent "God's side." It's a risk that people who *have* accomplished powerful works of restoration, reconciliation, deliverance, or transformation are particularly susceptible to.

Esther and Mordecai, unlikely as they first appeared to be as instruments of God's work, did achieve great things with divine purpose. They saved lives—lots of them—and vindicated a misrepresented Jewish people. But the ending of The Book of Esther is less edifying than the beginning.

It seems that, having accomplished extraordinary things, the pair became rather drunk with the power with which they'd been entrusted. Again, Frederick Buechner summarizes: "Not content with having saved their people and taken care of Haman, Esther and Mordecai used their new [influence] to orchestrate the slaughter of seventy-five thousand of their old enemies."² In his concluding thoughts about The Book of Esther, Buechner quips that it "has the distinction of being the only book in the Bible where the name of God isn't even mentioned. [And] there seems to be every reason to believe that [God] considered himself well out of it."³

So we need to be careful—it's back to that lesson about being both Great and Small that we heard about last week. But the Gospel testimony is clear: in Christ Jesus, God has invited each one of us to recognize that every single person has the potential and the calling to be a divine instrument of healing, hope, justice, and peace in the world.

Just as Jesus called the unlikely band of twelve as his original disciples, so you and I, as well as that odd and off-beat crazy neighbour we know—all of us are called by name, complete with our unique combinations of virtues and vices or vulnerabilities, fortes and flaws, to follow him. The living Christ calls us and empowers us to heal the world's hurting places and individuals in his name, whether we find them in our own home or family, or whether they're in

² Frederick Buechener, *Peculiar Treasures*, as quoted at: <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-xerxes-esther-haman-and-mordecai>

³ Ibid.

our daily workplace, or at the transfer station or supermarket or playground or half-way across the world trying to find a place to call home.

God will work with and through the most unlikely characters—me, you, and all sorts of others whom the world would never dream could be engaged for divine ends. May we simply be ready and willing instruments in God's hands. Amen.