

Sermon – The Risk of Speaking
Scripture – Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22, Mark 9:38-42
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Our first scripture reading from the Book of Esther is the Old Testament basis for the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim is celebrated in the spring and characterized by feasting at home, sending food to friends and making charitable gifts to the poor. The festival recalls the courage of a young woman, who risked her life by speaking on behalf of her people. Esther is dated in the fourth century (Before the Common Era) when the Persians ruled this part of the world. The ancient biblical story begins by telling us how Esther came to be queen. The former Queen Vashti refused to submit when the king summoned her after a seven day drinking binge. Outraged, the king announced a decree in all the land that every man should be master in his house and all the young, beautiful virgins were summoned before him to be chosen to replace Queen Vashti. Esther was selected and kept her Jewish identity hidden. When Esther learned from Mordicai, her uncle who is like a father to her, that one of the king's officers, Haman, issued a decree to annihilate all of the Jews, she devised a plan to go before the king and ask for mercy on behalf of her people. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God's word.

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" 6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. 20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is found in Mark, chapter 9, verses 38-42. Jesus continues in conversation with his disciples on his way to the cross and warns them about their tendency toward elitism, the sense of self-importance that subtly builds barriers between groups and persons. For whatever reason, the experience of being loved can lead to an unhealthy feeling of specialness, which questions others (as if God's love were somehow limited to a few) and at the same time fails to be self-critical. Hear now what God's word is speaking to our spirits.

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 42 "If any

of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Title of the sermon “The Risk of Speaking”

The Text: “Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have won favor, O king... let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request.’” Esther 7:3

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we thank you for Esther’s courage to speak on behalf of her people. May we learn from her example and may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

For just such a time as this... These familiar words from this ancient story are spoken by Mordicai to Esther regarding her position of power at a time when her people have their very existence threatened. *Who knows?* Mordicai wonders out loud, *Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.* As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Esther understands the meaning of these words and believes God is working in the circumstances of her life. She didn’t have to risk anything, but Esther chose to risk her life by approaching this unpredictable, irrational king and speaking on behalf of her people.

Unfortunately biblical scholars have not always recognized the risk Esther took on behalf of her people. Until recently, Christian theologians have been especially critical. Lewis Paton writes in 1908: *There is not one noble character in the book... Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty. Morally, Esther falls far below the general level of the Old Testament and even of the Apocrypha.*

Almost a century later in 1999, Sidnie Crawford writes: *With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Paton fell victim to his own preconceptions of what a biblical book “should” be like, rather than reading the book for what it is: an entertaining story written for an oppressed minority that ties a pagan holiday into a Jewish context. The tone of the book is ironic and gives the audience a chance to chuckle at those who, in the reality of the day-to-day life, rule over them. Esther actually has no choice about entering the king’s harem; once there, she makes the best of the situation and acts with courage and resourcefulness to save her people.*

The Book of Esther reminds us once again that scripture cannot be read meaningfully unless we understand the context and the culture in which it was written. Esther need not be criticized for the position she attained because of her beauty in a culture where women were valued as things rather than people. In the same way, when we teach the story of Esther today, we remember Esther for her courage and risk of speaking on behalf of her people rather than winning a beauty contest. And we teach our young women, that unlike in Esther’s day, they are valued for who they are and called to become all they can be, with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

Esther encourages us to act within the circumstances of each of our lives, especially those of privilege, and to risk speaking on behalf of those to whom we belong and those whose voices have been silenced. And rather than seeing those to whom we do not belong as outside the realm of God’s love, Jesus reminds us that those who are not against us are for us and advocates strongly that we speak out for the powerless and voiceless within our community.

It is not uncommon for people to ask me the circumstances that led to my becoming a minister. If I had lived in Esther's time, this would not have been an option. The journey toward ordination was certainly no beauty contest, although it was necessary for me to learn how to petition men in positions of authority along the way.

My parents would affirm that my call started when I was very young... my mom once sent a Peanuts cartoon strip which reminded her of me as a little girl. It featured Lucy on Show and Tell day. Speaking confidently she says, "For 'Show and Tell,' I have brought my new praying doll. You will note that her hands are held together in a praying position by Velcro. Are there any questions?" A little less sure, she responds in the next illustration, "No, I do not believe Velcro is mentioned in the New Testament. This is my praying doll. See how she holds her hands together... God is pleased with her, I think."

All would have been fine except before Lucy sits down, a classmate, a little boy pushes her and says, "Sit down, kid! I'm gonna show 'em my new rocket launcher." Without a hesitation, Lucy hits the little boy over the head with her praying doll and says, "How do you like my new 'praying doll,' launcher?"

In the next illustration, Lucy is sitting in the principal's office. "Yes, sir, Mr. Principal, I'm the one who brought her praying doll for Show and Tell. See?" After a dissertation from the principal which obviously goes right over Lucy's head, her final response is: "Separation of Church and State? No, I've never heard of that... But if that kid with the rocket launcher pushes me again, I'll separate his head from his neck!"

Not exactly sweet, but a lot of spunk! Although I never had a praying doll, I do have memories of being in church when I was a little girl. My mom was the organist and I sat next to my dad during the sermon, which was usually long and sometimes boring. My brother, sister and I got our own roll of Life Savers every Sunday... which was a treat and in retrospect, also a bribe.

When we were older, I remember my parents fighting at home because my brother got caught smoking in the bathroom and we all went to church that night. I felt better after the church service. I don't remember what the minister said but somehow I was comforted sitting in the sanctuary. It felt safe. I felt at home in the church. I felt that I belonged and sometimes I found comfort in God's home with my family and sometimes I sought refuge in God's home when my family didn't feel safe for whatever reason.

And so when I am asked why I am in the ministry, it is less about an individual belief and more about my sense of belonging, my experience of being a member of a family of faith, a baptized member of a covenant community. John H. Westerhoff III, in his book, *Living the Faith Community*, talks about the church as family. Something that is difficult to grasp within our culture with the emphasis on evangelism and the faith of the individual. Christianity, he claims, makes no sense outside of community and shares this story from *Christianity Rediscovered*, by Vincent Donovan.

After a year of evangelization among the Masai people in Kenya, Father Donovan met with the old man who headed the community and proceeded to sort out those who rarely attended church, those who didn't understand the faith, and those whose lives had shown no noticeable change because of it.

"Padri," the old man stopped him politely but firmly, "why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During the year you have visited, we have talked around the fire after you departed. Of course, there have been the idle ones, but they have been helped by those with much energy. There have been those who do not understand, but they have been helped by those who do. There have been

those of little faith; but they have been helped by those with much faith. From the first day you came, I have spoken for these people, and I speak for them now. We have reached the place where we can say, "We believe!"

"We believe – communal faith;" pondered Father Donavan. Then he recalled the old rite for the baptism of infants. "What do you ask of the church?" he would inquire of the child. Of course, the infant couldn't answer, but the infant's parents would supply the response. "Faith," Donavan reflected. "We come to the church not because we have faith but because we desire faith and know that it can only be ours if we live in a community of faith."

He looked at the old man, "Excuse me, old man, sometimes my head is hard and learns slowly. We believe, you said, of course you do. Everyone in the community will be baptized."

Today we welcome members into our community of faith through baptism, the sacrament at the heart of our life together. We speak words of welcome, we seek the courage of Esther and the wisdom of Christ, to risk in speaking on behalf of those to whom we belong *and to never put a stumbling block before one of these little ones.* Amen.