



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

When Memory Becomes Mercy Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Mark 9:38-50

If you have not read the Book of Esther lately, which I doubt many of us have, I urge you to do so. If you are looking for a story that includes royal extravagance, ancient rivalries, murderous plots, lavish parties, scandalous behavior, surprising twists and turns, and a happy ending, it will not disappoint! The story of Esther and her adopted father Mordecai in the Persian court of King Ahasuerus has all of these things and more.

Today we heard a “*Reader’s Digest*” version of the story. In short, there is a plot by Haman (who is essentially the Prime Minister) to avenge an ancient grudge between his ancestors and the Jewish people and most notably Mordecai who is a direct descendant of King Saul. Playing upon the King’s preoccupation with himself and his own pleasures, Haman initiates a plan to have the Persian people rise up on a particular day (which he has chosen by casting lots) and exterminate all the Jews in Persia, beginning with Mordecai whom he will hang on a gallows he has built in his back yard. Esther has become queen by virtue of something like a beauty pageant, though neither the King nor Haman knows she is Jewish. They are both preoccupied with their own interests, after all.

Mordecai learns of Haman’s plan and insists that Esther must alert the king. Earlier, Mordecai had discovered a plot to kill King Ahasuerus and alerted court officials to save the king’s life, though the king did not know that Mordecai was his hero. After all, the king was rather consumed with his own interests.

During a feast hosted by Queen Esther, the king, quite deeply into his cups, asked the queen what she desired. “You can have anything,” he offered, “up to half of my kingdom.” Her request was that the king spare her and her people from destruction which he, through the wiles of Haman, had ordered. When the king demanded to know who had devised this diabolical plot, Esther pointed to Haman. Enraged, the king had Haman hoisted on the gallows and Mordecai was given his place of honor and responsibility. The Jewish people were saved. The king was happy. And Mordecai called for an

annual celebration in which people would feast and share food and offer gifts to the poor.

To this day Jews still remember this event during the Feast of Purim which takes place is late winter or early spring. Each year, Jews around the world listen attentively as the Book of Esther is read. Each time the name of Haman is mentioned, they shout and boo. It can be a rather raucous celebration. Feasting and celebration are held to remember the day when the Jewish people escaped destruction, a fate they have faced too many times in their history.

There is a lot in this story to remember, but what remains with me is Mordecai's response to his near-death experience and the annihilation of his people. He urged them to celebrate, to feast, and to show good will and kindness to one another, especially to the poor. It was, perhaps, the first instance of what we know as "paying it forward." In response to the good that had happened to them, they were to be good to other people.

Celebrating our good fortune by doing something kind for someone else is not at all new to us. Long before the movie *Pay It Forward* was made, we often helped other because we had been helped at some point. Many of us support scholarship programs at our alma maters because we were beneficiaries of someone else's generosity when we were in school. People who have survived cancer or heart disease or who have been the beneficiary of a transplant in turn support foundations which make those treatments available to other people. Because of the help and generosity of so many people who supported our community following Hurricane Floyd and the flooding which devastated our town, we give to help other communities that are now struggling with the same challenges. In many ways, our offerings which support our ministries are in response to what God in Christ has done for us. Out of our gratitude we give so that someone else may discover God's love and grace.

This is as it should be. Out of our grief, hardship, tragedy, and challenge should arise a deep gratitude for the many ways we are supported and encouraged on our journey back to life. It is not always so, however. How many people through the ages who have been enslaved and oppressed have emerged from that humiliation only to impose it upon other people who come under their control? How many times have people fought their way up the ladder to economic, political, or social success only to make the way even harder for other people who attempt to follow them? How often do we forget

the hand up, the nudge, the big break, the leeway, the second chances that were offered to us when we have the opportunity to do the same for someone else? Our celebrations don't always include other people.

Mordecai recognized that the gift of memory can be both blessing and curse. It can be a blessing when we remember our good fortune. It can be a curse when it brings back painful events and unjust treatment. He wanted the Jewish people to remember their struggle and how close they came to losing everything including their lives, but he wanted them to do so in the context of gratitude. He wanted them to celebrate their good fortune by being good to someone else.

Jesus was a good Jew and understood these things. No doubt he took part in the annual Purim celebrations in Nazareth and probably booed and hissed louder than anyone when Haman's name was read from the Book of Esther. Likely he was the first one out the door to take a loaf of bread or a bowl of stew to one of his neighbors who was struggling with life. Certainly, he was the first to reach out and touch a leper, to talk with a woman in public, to dine with a tax collector, or let a prostitute wash his feet with her hair. Jesus did not limit his kindness to the once-a-year Feast of Purim. He lived his gratitude every day.

As he did with most things, I think Jesus took this principle of life to the extreme—which is where he lived most of the time. He knew that of all things, our memory holds the potential for great good or for tremendous evil.

This reality may have been the motivation for his response to John who complained that someone outside their little group was casting out demons in Jesus' name, as if he and the other disciples had a patent on healing in the name of Jesus. The text doesn't record it, but I have to imagine that Jesus laughed or at least chuckled at John for thinking he could control the power for good that originates with God. "Don't stop him," Jesus warned. "Whoever is not against us is for us!" In other words, stop trying to hoard the goodness of God. All good things originate with God, James would later write (James 1:17), so don't think you can keep it all to yourself. And do not attempt to stop anyone else from enjoying or using the goodness that God offers to us all. That would be like putting a stumbling block in their way to fulfilling God's desire for their lives.

Jesus went on to explain himself with some rather graphic suggestions as to what we should do if our hands or feet or eyes cause us to stumble by

harming someone else. I do not think Jesus intended for us to cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye if they cause us to limit someone else's ability to become who God intended them to be. Instead, I think Jesus was—is—trying to shock his listeners into thinking seriously about how their—our—lives impact the lives of other people.

How do we use our hands? Do they harm or help? Do the documents we sign, the work we do, the hands we shake in agreement, the money we spend, the things we create, the gestures we make . . . bring good or ill to other people and the world?

Where do our feet take us? Do they confine us to comfortable spaces where we are never confronted or challenged with the challenges other people have? Do our feet carry us to places we should not go and away from places we need to be? Do they stomp in anger and violence or skip with delight and peace?

What do our eyes see? Do we recognize a wonderfully diverse and complex world that is intricately woven together? Or do we see only chaos and confusion that threaten our small corner of the world? Do we see brothers and sisters who may look nothing like us except for the gleam of hope and longing for acceptance in their eyes? Or do we see strangers who threaten the things that we hold dear? Do we see a world of beauty with resources we are called to tend for our benefit and enjoyment? Or do we see a treasure trove of commodities that can enrich us and make our life more comfortable? Are we more preoccupied with our own interests—like Ahasuerus and Haman or do we care about the people around us and their lot in life like Mordecai?

We see this reality playing out in front of us in the Supreme Court confirmation hearings that are taking place. Supposedly, we are seeking the truth as to the character of the nominee to the highest court in our land. What is obvious, however, is that everyone involved is concerned with their own interests. How a senator votes may determine whether or not he or she is re-elected. How a senator votes will affect who becomes the next Supreme Court Justice which will affect the lives of all people in this country for years to come. How a senator votes will send a message to the rest of us about sexual abuse, about accountability, about transformation, about healing, about youthful recklessness and adult culpability, and, above all, about the value of truth. What their hands touch, where their feet take them, what their eyes see and their ears hear will make a difference in their lives and also in

the lives of millions of other people. We cannot be so concerned about our own interests that we do not seek the truth, whatever it may be.

What we touch, where we go, and what we see have a lot to do with how we understand God and the world God created. They have everything to do with how we understand ourselves and relate to other people in the world.

I like Mordecai's suggestion that we keep our memories alive. Let us remember all of the goodness that came to us in time of hardship, all of the comfort that was offered in times of distress, all of the help that was given in time of need, and the saving graces that came when life was tenuous at best. Let us remember our good fortune and realize that all good things do come from the hand of God—and often by the hands of other people. The wonderful reality of it all is that we get to be those people as well. We get to be the ones who pay it forward by helping other people enjoy life. We get to be God's hands and feet and eyes wandering around this big, beautiful world filled with amazing, creative, interesting, and wonderful people of all kinds. We get to be the one's celebrating God's salvation of us day by day and sharing that goodness with anyone we meet.

In a few weeks, our Cherub Choir, our youngest singers, will offer us a song that shares this truth quite simply. Listen and remember the words they will sing for us:

Little drops of water, little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean, and the beautiful land.

And the little moments, humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages of eternity.

So our little errors lead the soul away
From the path of virtue, oft in sin to stray.

Little deeds of kindness, little words of love,
Make our earth an Eden like the heaven above.¹

Today is the day of our salvation! Today is the day to remember, to celebrate, and to share God's grace. Amen.

¹Julia A. F. Carney, "Little Things," in *The Children's Hour: Old Fashioned Stories and Poems* (1907).

September 30, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is our hope and our joy, you have created us with hearts capable of loving and receiving love because you are a God of love, calling us into relationship with you and with one another. You have graced our lives with family and friends who support and strengthen us, who share the joys and sorrows of life, who call us to be our best selves, who walk as companions along our journey. You created us to live in community, to join with others for work and worship, for rest and play, finding delight and encouragement in one another. For the gifts of those with whom we share life, the ways we love and nurture one another, and every good gift which we receive from you, we offer our thanks and praise.

We realize, too, O God, that loving one another can be risky. When we love, we are vulnerable to being disappointed or hurt by those to whom we open our hearts. When we take your command to love one another seriously, we may share the pain which others experience, realize our responsibility to respond to their need, or even dare to follow Christ's example of taking on the suffering of others in order to stand with them. Out of the great love with which you loved us and gave yourself for us, teach us to love one another, Merciful God. Where we find loneliness, help us to be present. Where we find sickness of body, mind, or spirit, empower us to bring healing. Where there is poverty, give to us a generosity of spirit. Where we find violence, teach us to be messengers of your peace. Where there is division, enable us to promote unity. Where darkness and despair seem to reign, grant that we might offer the light and hope of Christ. Give to us hearts that are open to one another and to you, O Love that will not let us go, that we might live and love after the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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