

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

30 September 2018

Hebrew Scripture: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Christian Scripture: James 5:13-20

“An Inescapable Network of Mutuality”

Those who have been following the news this week have had a heavy week. I am not really in the mood for a funny joke this morning. So, you will forgive me if I do not begin with one.



You did not need to study at seminary to be able to link the story of Esther and the hearings in Washington, D.C. over Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh. The parallel nature of the dramatic stories hits one across the forehead like a 'two-by-four'.

I do not want you to become scared or apprehensive. I have no intention this morning of talking *party* politics. Nor am I here to share with you my personal opinion. Relationships for me are primary, and I deeply treasure all my relationships with you. I do not wish to jeopardize the bonds that tie us together in this local church. To invite, foster, stoke and fuel division our beautiful church on this issue will be an abandonment of my calling.

Yet, to avoid saying anything substantive about this event of national importance is also an abandonment of my calling. As a minister of the gospel, I am called to offer you a Christian perspective on the 'signs of our times'. So, that's my preface.

This week, I followed the news like many of you (My word! One friend in South Africa texted me 'Are you watching this?!'). In particular, this Thursday was a national,

indeed a global, spectacle. How is the drama playing-out before us related to our scriptures this morning and what is the gospel message, the good news, “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14)?



The story of Esther is a fascinating one. The few verses we read this morning do not do it justice. You really need to read the entire book, which is not long at all, to comprehend the full expanse of the story.¹

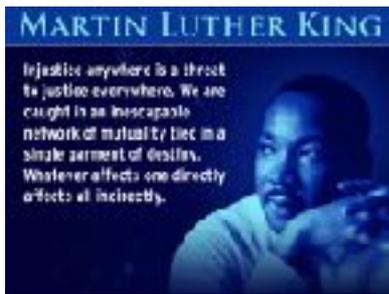
In short, Esther is a heroine who speaks ‘truth to power’. The story takes place in ancient Persia, where King Xerxes rules over a vast country and harem (2:3). Xerxes, while drunk (1:10), summoned his beautiful wife, Vashti, to be displayed in front an audience (1:11). Vashti refused. In consultation with his all male counsel (1:13), Xerxes decided that because Vashti refused his orders, she should be divorced (1:19-20). The primary reason for her disposal is to warn other women not to disobey men (1:17-18). After a kingdom-wide search is made for the best virgin in his harem, the king chose Esther, a closet Hebrew, after she underwent one year of beauty treatments (2:12). The king tried her out, so to speak, liked her the most and selected her to be his queen.

¹ Gene Tucker, “Easter”, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 198-201.



The second protagonist is Mordecai, Esther's uncle. At the gates of the capital city, Mordecai discovered a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther about the plot and she in turn warned the king, referencing Mordecai, thus saving the sovereign's life. Mordecai however got himself in trouble for now bowing down before the story's primary antagonist, Haman, the king's prime minister. Haman believed he had a right to be respected and he understood that his privilege entitled him to power. Mordecai's refusal to be submissive infuriated Haman and he plotted to kill Mordecai and *all* his people, the Hebrews.

Mordecai conspired with Esther and convinced her to visit the king and persuade him to change the course of the prime minister's murderous rampage. Now, just as Vashti risked her life by not submitting her presence for the king, so Esther risked her life by imposing her unsolicited presence (for only he, as the man, could summon the woman for his needs). Esther was asked to forfeit all of her privilege, even her life, for the sake of others, in order to challenge power. The most famous quote in the story is Mordecai's plea to Esther not to remain silent, but to speak-out: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to this royal position for such as time as this" (4:14).



Mordecai told Esther that though she is privileged she was caught in, what The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently stated in his letter from the prison in Birmingham, “an inescapable network of mutuality” wherein we are “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.² Esther’s fate was tied, for better or for worse, to her people’s fate. Ultimately, Haman’s fate was also tied to Mordecai and Esther’s fate, although for the worse.



Esther bravely, but submissively and diplomatically, succeeded in speaking to the king who promised to grant her wish: “If I have found favour with you, O King, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request” (7:3). Esther told the king the plot against Mordecai, the Hebrews, and hence herself and ‘outed’ Haman as the mastermind. The king ordered Haman’s demise. Mordecai, Esther and the Jews survive and live happily-ever-after.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, April 16, 1963. African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, Page editor: Ali B. Ali-Dinar, accessed October 2, 2018. Africa.upenn.edu



There are many aspects I find deeply troubling about this story, so much so I agonised whether to preach on it. First of all, I am uncomfortable with the fact the only means by which Esther had any impact on her society was through sex. Truth be told, Esther was essentially sex-trafficked or ‘pimped’, found herself in a harem, was a good concubine, and replaced an assertive wife. All of this reeks of patriarchy and power against women.



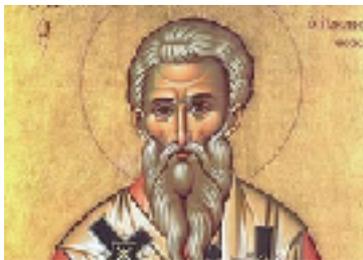
Second, I am deeply uncomfortable with the fact that Mordecai and Esther engage in a deadly game of ‘tit for tat’. What could be a beautiful example of forgiveness and mercy becomes a murder spree going the other direction. The scriptures tell us that “the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them (9:1) [...] The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them”(9:5).



Esther requests that the king also hang Haman’s ten sons on the gallows (9:13). So, just as we have the positive aspect to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “inevitable network of mutuality”

for the better in Esther's saving of the Jews along with herself we have Haman's "inevitable network of mutuality" in the execution of his sons along with him. Friends, this is not the gospel. The lesson, in and of itself from Esther, is *not* 'good news'. [We need only see the turmoil, the conflict and the death resulting in Gaza this week to know that the policy of recrimination is destructive to all.]

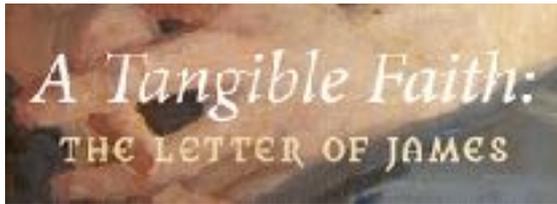
So, where is the gospel in our scriptures? How is M.L. King's "inevitable network of mutuality" not simply the double-edged sword that it seems to be in Esther's story?



We have been reading the book James for some months. James teaches us how we ought to behave in a faith community, and I would argue, also in our domestic body politic and the global stage. Let us turn then to the Christian scriptures and read from the book of James.

In James it is written, "If any one of you are in trouble, the other should pray". Now, 'prayer' is a euphemism for 'solidarity' and solidarity is expressed with tangible expressions of love. As Richard Rohr states, faith is more about doing than it is about believing.³ For you cannot genuinely pray for someone without to some extent walking their journey with them and assisting in any way possible. Think how hallow our prayers would be without hugs, visits, flowers, meals, financial assistance, and, well, action through loving care. [It is no wonder that we ridicule legislators for expressing their 'thoughts and prayers' to the victims of one school shooting after another without taking any effective measures to mitigate them.]

³ Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation, "First Sunday of Advent: Standing Tall with Dignity", podcast, November 29, 2017.



Our reading from James concluded, “Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins”. While this scripture can be viewed from many different perspectives, what I do not hear is the desire for the destruction, the ruin, the humiliation, the punishment, the death of the sinner (or anyone that we are opposed). I hear in James an ethic that says that we are all sinners. I hear an ethic in James that declares that if your neighbour is joyful, you should be joyful. If your neighbour is hurting, you should be hurting. If someone is sick, you ache as well. If we confess, we all benefit. If we submit to one another, we all are raised-up. In other words, I hear James speaking about an ‘inevitable network of mutuality’ in which my fortune is bound-up with yours, for good. If you suffer, I suffer. If you prosper, I prosper.



Friends in Christ, I promised you I would not speak in a partisan fashion. I intend to keep my promise. But, what occurred on Thursday at the Senate hearings in Washington, D.C. grieved me deeply. I see this nation tearing itself apart. I see people, on the right and on the left, un-persuaded by relationships. Why? Because there are scarcely any relationships left in Washington. We are witnessing a knife fight and it is ugly and it is bloody. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us that we are in an “inevitable network of mutuality” in which we will thrive or bleed together.



This past week I travelled to the Department of Motor Vehicles. [My word, talk about an “inevitable network of mutuality”! It is inevitable you won’t get out of there in two hours and you can almost be sure that no one else will either - that’s the ‘mutuality’ part!] There, I registered to vote. Before I vote, I will search for candidates who do not vote strictly on a party line but rather cross the aisles and vote for the common good on principle. I will also search for candidates who have relationships of love and mutual respect for their colleagues on the other side of the aisle. I will search for candidates who emulate for me the perspective of my role models: Dart Everett, Don Webster and Jack Bixby. These are good men, who in the short time I have known them or known of them, have demonstrated to me a Christian ethic that acknowledges the “inevitable network of mutuality” that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated.

The gospel from James advocated for us to embrace the “inevitable network of mutuality” when relating to one another. Therefore, first, we need to be very wary of an ‘America First’ ethic (that we heard trumpeted at the United Nations this past week) that only recognises the nation-state as a bond of unity to the embarrassing neglect of Christianity, let alone humanity.

Second, we need to be very wary that we do not return evil with evil. Christ taught us to turn the other cheek. Christ taught us blessed are the meek. Christ taught us blessed are those who mourn. Christ taught us to love God first and love our neighbour as ourselves. I fear for our country’s condition, with partisan knife-fights tearing apart, from the left and right, the very fabric of our nation. We need to pray for our nation, that we do not just become mutuality destructive. If we do, we will end-up bleeding or we will cause others to bleed as was the case in the murderous conclusion of the book of Esther.



Finally, I would like to speak about relations between men and women. For most of human civilization men have lorded power over women. Men have used and use women at their pleasure, primarily for sex (but also for labor). Men manipulate and control women into submission for selfish purposes. This must end! The story of Esther makes me cringe. The hearings in Washington make me cringe. I'm not saying who is right and who is wrong in Washington. What I am saying is that you do not need to read the Bible to realise that women have historically been victims of men's power plays and you don't have to watch the hearings in Washington to know that the dynamic still exists!



The gospel that we need to hear is that no matter if one is a citizen of the United States or Honduras, Republican or Democrat, male or female, we are all one in Christ's Jesus and thus caught in "an inevitable network of mutuality". Thank God for the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ.

This was the word of God, and it was spoken to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".