

Hatred Will Lift You Up

Sunday, September 27, 2015; Esther 7:1-6, 9-10

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The Book of Esther, from which today's reading comes, is set in the Susa, capital city of the Persian Empire, sometime during its period of supremacy. It is a unique book in the Bible in that it not once mentions God, however, it does mention how God's people are protected and preserved through their times of trial. It is an important piece of literature for Jews as it is a reminder of how their people and their traditions were preserved even after they were exiled by the Assyrians and Babylonians and then living as second-class citizens in the Persian Empire. The story of Esther is remembered in the popular celebration of Purim, and it is read each year on that day as Jews remember how they were delivered from annihilation by powerful empires.

The events of today's reading from the seventh chapter of Esther take place after the Persian King Ahasuerus had taken Esther, not knowing she was Jewish, to be his favored wife after her cousin and care-taker Mordecai worked to ensure that the king would take notice of her. Sometime after Esther became queen, Mordecai learned of a plot to assassinate the king and foiled the plan by notifying the king through Esther, and so Mordecai became the king's savior. At the time, however, Mordecai's action was not celebrated by the king, who instead favored an Amalekite, traditional enemies of the Hebrews, by the name of Haman, and elevated him to a position second only to the king. Haman the Amalekite, full of his exalted self, despised Mordecai the Jew and schemed to have him hanged and to have all the Jews throughout the empire executed as well. During the banquet of today's reading, in which Esther reveals her Jewish identity as well as the plot of Haman to kill all the Jews, the Queen becomes the savior of the people. And that dastardly Haman finds himself further lifted up, to the gallows that he himself had built for Mordecai.

From the story of Queen Esther, we learn that the lowly can be lifted up, and that from that lofty place, lift others up. As a Jew, the Queen was born as a second-class citizen in the empire. Her parents both died when she was a child, and so she was also an orphan, raised by her cousin Mordecai. And she was a she, a female, and women had little to no power or control of their own lives in the ancient near east. So she went from being a powerless, oppressed orphan girl to the favored wife of the king of the empire, who offered her whatever she wanted, up to half of the kingdom. The lowly became lofty. And from her lofty position, she could have grasped even more power, claiming that half of the kingdom, but she didn't. Instead, she risked losing it all, including her own life, by revealing her identity as she cared for her own people, the lowly, outcast ex-exiles marked for extinction. Her selfless love guided her to be so bold, and it led her to becoming the savior of her people, a station even loftier than being the ruler of an empire.

From the story of Haman the hater, we learn that the exalted can also be lifted up—to their own gallows. Haman was already the King's second in command; he had risen to the top. But that was not good enough for him. He not only wanted to be at the top, but he wanted to push those beneath him further down. It was Haman's selfish hatred of the other, and his own greedy desire to humiliate and annihilate his enemy, that caused his life to end at the gallows; the devices that he had built to deal with his enemy became the means of his own destruction.

The tale of Esther and Haman is as relevant now as it ever has been. And for us, perhaps more than ever, for it asks the questions of the wealthy and powerful, and those of us who are gathered here this morning have a position of power and wealth. And so the examples of Esther and Haman, how they used their power and wealth and the outcomes of their values and decisions, are lessons for us and call us to honest reflection. We must ask ourselves:

How much wealth and power is enough for us? Does our acquisition and maintenance of power press others down? How willing are we to use our power and wealth to lift others up? And what if this requires us to risk sacrificing our lofty place?

These same questions have been asked this week by Pope Francis. In his address to the United States Congress, he called upon our nation to use our great wealth to lift the lowly, saying, “I would encourage you to keep in mind all those people around us who are trapped in a cycle of poverty. They too need to be given hope...It goes without saying that part of this great effort is the creation and distribution of wealth... ‘Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving the world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the area in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.’” I would agree with the Pope that our wealth and structures in place and those we create to generate wealth should be aimed at increasing the *common* good. And this is the heart of the matter. Do we use our position of power, like Haman, to gain more power for our own sake, or do we use it, like Esther, to empower others? For if we are moved selfishness and greed and serve only ourselves, we demonstrate contempt for a needy world and lift ourselves up only to our own destruction. But if we truly love the world as God loves the world and give of ourselves for the common good, we will find a better place for ourselves and world as we bring the world more justice and peace.

Former pastor, Richard Innes, tells the following story: “Craig Saunders wrote about an experience he witnessed when he attended a Special Olympics for the Handicapped where several people from his church were competing. He shared how in the 220 track race a very fast runner named Andrew was 50 yards ahead of the rest of the runners when he glanced back and saw his best friend fall. The crowd at the finishing post was yelling to Andrew, ‘Come on, come on, come on!’

“But Andrew stopped and went back and took his friend’s hand and lifted him to his feet and they ran together to finish the race. The entire crowd stood to their feet and applauded. As Saunders said, ‘It was an amazing sight because that’s what the Special Olympics are about. People don’t consider being ‘Number One.’ The most important thing is that people finish the race.’

“Andrew won the Sportsman Award at those Special Olympics because he was more concerned about being ‘Number One’ to his friend than being ‘Number One’ to the crowd.”¹

May our efforts at being number one be like Andrew’s and like Esther’s, motivated above all by love for others. And may our love be an everlasting blessing to a world in need of love. Amen.

¹ Richard Innes, “A True Winner,” accessed on September 27, 2015, <http://www.actsworld.org/articles/article.php?i=1370&d=2&c=6>