

Using All Our Smarts
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 and 9:20-22
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
September 30, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

Last Sunday's Gospel lesson has been working on me. Do you remember what Kelly read last Sunday? Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms, he said, "Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me."

That's been working on me. Jesus invites those of us who are up in the world - straight, white, male, American, educated, privileged - to be truly gracious, truly accepting, truly welcoming of those who are not.

We read it that way because of one very important dynamic that's easy to overlook. So often, you see, I and perhaps you picture Jesus with that beautiful little child on his knee and we think, "Ahhh! Isn't that cute?" But that isn't *at all* the way the society and culture considered children in the first century. In Jesus' day, children were almost non-entities. They weren't seen as cute, weren't valued as growing people. They were almost nothing.

So it is radical when Jesus marks our acceptance of what we usually recognize as only the devalued, the overlooked, the unimportant as a critically important part of our discipleship. Through this Gospel lesson, Jesus is asking us:

Do we truly see the homeless? And value them as sisters and brothers?

Do we truly listen to women? And give credence to their testimony?

Do we truly welcome and accept people of color? And honor them in a myriad of ways?

Do we truly recognize those different from us? Or only ignore them and put them down?

And from this week's lesson:

Are we truly willing to be salt in the world? Or do we get too much from our privilege and power?

This week has been a very painful one for our nation. Two accomplished individuals have testified before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee. It is impossible to know for certain which one is telling the truth.

But one thing is for certain: Both their lives have been forever changed. From this moment on, they will be forever marked by this experience.

This is indeed a very painful moment in American life. Last Thursday alone, calls to the largest sexual assault hotline in the United States spiked 147%. Counselors, therapists and pastors are listening as so many women relive the tragedies they have experienced.

One of my friends, Brian Shivers, is a gifted pastor at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis. Here is the wisdom he shared last Thursday: "Be quiet. Listen to her story. It may be difficult to hear it. Rest assured, it was much more difficult to live it. She doesn't need your commentary. [This is what she needs:] Hear her. See her. Believe her."

We as followers of Jesus Christ have been sensitized this week to those who are devalued and overlooked and unimportant, those who have been abused or victimized or ignored.

It's impossible not to see. I opened the newspaper yesterday morning. The lead story on page two was of a high-ranking government official in a Midwestern state who was sexually harassed by her boss. Her boss' behaviors were reportedly so egregious that I cannot name them aloud here.

This is not a partisan story, friends. Both the official herself and her boss – and the state’s governor and lieutenant governor – are all members of the same political party. Instead this is a story of the powerful and the privileged mistreating the people under them.

Then there was the story that came across my news feed on the internet. An assistant principal at a high school in Tennessee said in a school video that “the school’s new dress code . . . was enforced because ‘girls pretty much ruin everything.’”

“‘If you really want someone to blame,’ he said, ‘blame the girls. Because they pretty much ruin everything. They ruin the dress code, they ruin . . . well, ask Adam. Look at Eve.’”

All of this comes to a head this morning in the Old Testament text from today’s lectionary. Esther is the Jewish queen of the Persian Empire. She is the wife of the Persian king. She and the rest of the Jews are strangers in a strange land. She is at risk. Her people are at risk.

The story begins with the whims and power of King Ahasuerus of Persia. His original queen, Queen Vashti, does not please him, does not come when he sends for her, so he puts her away. He removes her as queen. He falls in love with Esther and makes her his new queen.

But one of the court officials, Haman, an enemy of Esther and her family, lays a trap for her and her uncle Mordecai. This evil court official plots to put to death, to annihilate all the Jews.

Esther realizes that she must speak with her husband, the king, to intercede for God’s people. But she also realizes that she will risk her life in doing so, for the punishment for anyone who approaches the king without being summoned is death.

Esther does exactly as she has planned. She risks her life to plead for the lives of her people. The great good news is that the king grants her wish, and the Jews are spared. She herself is spared.

But the point of the story remains. The vulnerable one, the easily overlooked one, the often devalued one, the queen, has to plead for the lives of her and her people with the king, her superior, the one with the power.

One of the most painful experiences of my Christian life has been beginning to understand how privileged I am in comparison to people of color, to gays and lesbians, to the homeless and uneducated, to women.

Just eight years ago I had the great privilege of travelling through Israel and Palestine with a group of pastors organized by Columbia Seminary. Half the group were women pastors, from all over the country. I made new friends with so many of the pastors in the group, and I cherish those friendships. The greatest tragedy of the trip for me was hearing the stories – the terrible, painful stories – of women pastors who had been abused and harassed and terribly mistreated by men, most often men within the church. It was eye-opening. It was awful.

Several years ago our youngest daughter started sharing publicly the catcalls and other comments from strangers, from men, that she passes on the streets of New York City while simply walking on the way to work. Just a few days ago our oldest daughter shared how her life would change if she knew that men would not be out on the streets where she lives in the evening: “I would walk the dog after dark,” she said. “I would walk with my headphones in, actually playing music. I would be outside in a parking lot or garage without my keys in my hand, ready to use to fend someone off. I would not lock the door at work immediately after my last client leaves for the day. I would run in the park anytime I wanted.”

What kind of world are we living in?

Friends, it all comes down to this: Following Jesus demands energy, intention, savvy, imagination – and a lot of chutzpah. There are all the qualities we find within Esther as she is bargaining for

her life. To be a Christian is to stand with the devalued, the overlooked, the unimportant, the different. To follow Jesus is to risk our friendships, our fortunes, our reputations, our lives for them.

Layton Williams is a Presbyterian pastor friend. She works for Sojourners Magazine. Yesterday she reminded me of the quote of St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in the fourth and fifth century. Augustine wrote this: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

Together you and I live in hope. Hope for a day in which sexual assaults and harassment are far less frequent, hope for the full inclusion of the overlooked and devalued in our life together, hope for the genuine sharing of power and prestige.

But as we follow Jesus, as we still see and as we welcome and love and honor the abused and unimportant, we must transform our anger and disappointment at all these injustices into courage to work for a new day.

So, sisters and brothers, what will you do with your privilege? How will you use your power?

Who knows? It may be for just such a time as this that you and I have been put here as disciples.