

BEING ACCOUNTABLE DISCIPLES

Pentecost 18 – Cycle B: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Mark 9:38-50

Part of both Jewish and Christian piety is holding up people whose faith directed their life; whose faith was visible in their actions. Sometimes we call these people holy examples; sometimes they are described as saints, either figuratively or literally. Myrta Rivera, who for most of my years in this community was the heart and soul of the K-W Multicultural Centre, was someone whose faith was visible in the important work she did with newcomers to the Twin Cities, including thousands of refugees from other countries, other cultures, other faiths, people who often spoke no English, find home here. Myrta's death this past week became an occasion for public gratitude for all that she has done for our community; hundreds of people streamed into the Erb and Good Funeral Home midweek to pay their respects; and I predict that her memorial service next Saturday at Trinity United Church will be filled to overflowing. We notice the Myrta Riveras and Mother Teresas and Dag Hammarskjølds and Martin Luther Kings and Desmond Tutus in our world because they embody the gospel love and radical justice that people of faith understand to be God's love and God's justice. In a world where the church has too often blotted its copybook, there are still those who inspire believers and non-believers alike by how they have translated their faith into actions that benefit the many.

In our prayers this morning, we remember Saint Jerome whose commemoration is September 30 on the church calendar. His name is well known in Kitchener-Waterloo because when the Roman Catholic priests of the Congregation of the Resurrection came to this area in the early 1800s, after organizing and establishing a few congregations, they founded Saint Jerome's College. Consequently, Saint Jerome has been part of our community vocabulary since 1865. But his significance is not unlike Martin Luther's in that he translated the Bible into the language of the people. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin was an enormous gift to the church because it meant that Scripture could be proclaimed and understood at the mass. It is conceivable that the Christian movement could have fizzled out without Jerome's contribution.

Esther (or Hadassah, her Hebrew name) is another holy example. Interestingly, the story of Esther is not history; but the book of Esther speaks the truth concerning how faith was translated into action when the Jews were in exile – in this case, in Persia, modern-day Iran. The king, remembered in our version of Scripture as Ahasuerus was also known by his Greek name of Xerxes. The main characters in the story are Mordecai, Esther's adoptive father, Esther who by virtue of her beauty and charm eventually becomes Ahasuerus's queen, and Haman, Ahasuerus's prime minister.

Because Vashti, Ahasuerus's first queen embarrassed him publicly, he essentially divorces her and removes her title. He then assembles a harem from which he will select a new queen. Mordecai sees this as an opportunity for the Jews living in Persia to gain influence, and has Esther become part of the king's harem. As it happened, Ahasuerus chooses Esther from the harem to become his new queen.

Haman is portrayed as being full of himself and demanding that everyone bow down in his presence. Mordecai, Esther's father, a conspicuous leader of the scattered Jewish community, refuses to bow down to Haman. Mordecai reserves his homage for the God of Israel and thus incurs Haman's wrath.

Mordecai is very much in Haman's face, and he sets in motion a plan to hang Mordecai from the gallows and then kill all the remaining Jews living in Persia and Media. Ahasuerus seems unaware of a number of things: first of all, Haman's genocidal plan, and second that Esther, his queen, is Jewish. Ahasuerus, however, is head-over-heels in love with Esther, and on the occasion of a feast she throws in his honour, he promises her anything she wishes, even half of his kingdom, if she desires it. She is aware of the death sentence over the head of her people and, presumably, her own head; but she also knows of the king's naiveté. And so she throws a second feast for Ahasuerus and Haman at which she makes her wish, which is to spare her people and herself. In the course of their dialogue, Haman's plan of Jewish genocide is disclosed and the king interprets Haman's actions as tantamount to treason. With the counsel of a senior courtier, Harbona, he decides that Haman should be hung from the gallows that he had built for the execution of Esther's father, Mordecai.

Esther risked everything, the story shows us, for the sake of her people, and because of her courage she is remembered as a holy example. The Jewish holiday of Purim celebrates how the oppression of the

Jews was relieved when they were in exile by people such as Esther whose faith and courage and strength of character called forth justice.

In today's Gospel, the action and discussion is about those whose faith does not lead them. Initially, we see John speaking to Jesus about someone who is not one of the twelve disciples being successful in casting out demons, something which the twelve were not able to do when Jesus sent them out. John, it appears, wants to close the circle of blessing to include just those who were called into discipleship by Jesus himself. Jesus quickly corrects John's distortion of their mission: the thrust of the gospel is always to include more and more people, not to draw a circle around those it has blessed.

Jesus goes on to speak of the imperative of faith leading to actions that will bless the many. It is the community of the faithful who become his focus and concern, and so he uses the rather graphic metaphors of amputating parts of the body and eternal damnation to stress how critical it is to *embody* the gospel. When he talks to his disciples of being salt, he is talking about putting faith into action. When he speaks of placing a stumbling block before the little ones, he is referring to misrepresenting the gospel by failing to respond.

It is a hard teaching, because it calls for our accountability as his disciples; it calls for us to do more than venerate Jerome and Esther; it calls for us to make the gospel our own and embody our faith.

And so, here is a challenge. This morning we begin our annual response to the Thanksgiving Food Drive. Over the next two weeks, most of us will be intentional when we do our grocery shopping about getting something to contribute. Some will donate money as well as food. Our efforts will feed the thousands who rely on the Food Bank for meals and groceries. We are doing good works out of love for those in need. Gospel love, but not necessarily gospel justice.

Jesus would remind us that there is a second call and that we have more work to do. Somehow we need to change the conditions that require our neighbours to use the food bank; we need to provide a leg up not a handout; we need to be in solidarity with those who are struggling in our community, not keep our distance; we need to become part of the solution; we need to cast out the demons of haves and have-nots, us and them, rich and poor, establishment and newcomer – all of the polarities that are so easy to ignore. Jesus calls us to account in this morning's gospel and it appears as if we have much to do.