

SAVING GRACE

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

I have been thinking lately about how God's saving ways, recorded and interpreted in Holy Scripture, have formed people of faith as those dedicated to saving others.

The Salvation Army is probably the best example of a Christian community whose primary mission is to offer people a second chance or third or fourth when they struggle in life. One of my friends, a cradle Lutheran who grew up in war-ravaged Europe in the 1940's, commented to me years ago that he saw the Salvation Army as the best Christians. I registered shock, because his commitment to the Lutheran Church was unquestionable; but he explained to me that of all the Christian groups he encountered in his childhood and youth, it was the Salvation Army who had worked tirelessly to help people in need, providing food, shelter, and clothing. In the mission of the Salvation Army, he saw the Christian faith expressed in practical, saving ways – ways that were given much less emphasis in his own church and in other mainline churches.

My friend's comments stuck with me, because even in the Canada of my childhood and youth, the Salvation Army was conspicuous in virtually every community for their dedication to those who were poor, in need, and often struggling with addictions. Before some of the other Christian groups set up shelters, clothing depots, and support programs, the Salvation Army was already at work, leading the way.

The YMCA and YWCA were also prominent in most communities in Canada and the United States for providing low-cost accommodation and inexpensive-but-nutritious meals. These days, it is easy to confuse the YMCA with a fitness club because of their three beautiful recreational facilities in Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge. The Kitchener YWCA reflects more visibly the tradition of support for which the "Y" was known in the first 120 of its 160 years in Canada. The YWCA's Women's Shelter is well-known in this community. But if you scratch the surface of both the YMCA and the YWCA, you will find that they are still very busy with saving work in our community, supporting families, supporting children, and helping newcomers find work and get established. And like the Salvation Army, they are a global organization working in 120 countries. Although they have recently toned down the "Christian" connection in their name – the "C" in YMCA and YWCA stands for the word "Christian," the Young Men's and Young Women's *Christian* Associations – their mission is still informed by the goal of integrating body, mind, and spirit. My hope is that at next year's Community Barbecue we might celebrate our congregation's connection with the YWCA and the YMCA through Sheryl and Alicia with displays at our partners' fair.

God's saving ways.

I love the story of Esther, part of which we heard in this morning's First Reading. The book of Esther is an oddity in the Bible: it is a tall tale that seeks to give background to the Jewish festival of Purim. There is virtually no history in the story, apart from the presence of a community of Jews in Persia during the Exile. But the story has power, and Esther is a role model for advocacy in the face of injustice. She uses her influence to right a wrong. She is the instrument of God's saving ways in the story.

The king, remembered in the story is Ahasuerus. 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 happens, Ahasuerus chooses Esther from the harem to become his new queen.

Haman, the prime minister, 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 Haman sets in motion a plan to hang Mordecai from the gallows and then kill all the remaining Jews living in Persia and Media. King 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 hanged 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 became the agency for God's saving ways.

In today's Gospel, John reports to Jesus that someone other than one of Jesus' immediate disciples is casting out demons in Jesus' name. John is gently reprimanded by Jesus for thinking of their ministry as a franchise. As far as Jesus is concerned, the circle of blessing is open for anyone who wishes to take up God's saving work.

I mentioned earlier that I had been thinking lately about how God's saving ways, recorded and interpreted in Holy Scripture, have formed people of faith as those dedicated to saving others. These thoughts have been prompted by the Syrian refugee crisis and by the courage of Pope Francis in becoming the moral conscience of a world that seems to have lost its way on many fronts.

Certainly in Canada, our churches are ready, it seems, to continue the saving work of refugee sponsorship and settlement established by preceding generations. With St. James, St. Jacobs, Christ Church sponsored the Romero family in the 1980's. The church I served a few years earlier had been involved in sponsoring and settling Vietnamese and Laotian refugees, and I believe Christ Church had some involvement with one of the families sponsored by St. Peter's, Kitchener. And when I served as Director of Music at St. Peter's, I heard story after story of how Germans, Latvians, Estonians, and Romanians had come to Canada and found home at St. Peter's after both the First and Second World Wars. God's saving ways are alive and well when we sponsor and welcome refugees and support them for at least a year of transition.

And then Francis, criticized by so many for speaking out against the wholesale destruction of our planet so that people, businesses, and nations with wealth can become wealthier - Francis, using his influence and position as an agent of God's saving ways. I wonder if he, too, enjoys the story of Esther and notes how faith and courage and strength of character become the agency for God's saving ways.

We have much to think about as a congregation and as those who are called by water and God's word. Would my friend look at our church and see us as favourably as he saw the Salvation Army when he was growing up? Do we take seriously the grace we love so dearly in Jesus' life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection?

Francis would say that our actions will answer these questions. For the time being, he is being wonderfully prophetic in shining a light on the gospel. He reminds us of our call; he shows us what God's saving ways look like in our world today. But he knows and we know that it is we who are called to be the Body of Christ, given for the deep needs of the world; to be the agency of God's saving grace in our place and time.