

Esther 4: 12-14

The Face of Justice

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our sermon theme is Justice. So far in this series we have talked a lot about the principles of justice. Today we want to talk about the face of justice. Knowing the principles of justice only goes so far. Knowing why we do justice is not the same as looking at examples of how this work is done. The Bible is full of stories of people who step up to the challenges of doing the right thing in difficult circumstances. There are plenty of examples of folks who face hard decisions, wonder about their obligation to the poor and poor in spirit. The Bible does not sugar-coat these moments or downplay their difficulty. The Bible describes the world as it is and envisions it as it might be, where people live in harmony and justice - while not always easy, is always possible. Nowhere is this vision more eloquently described than in the story we of a remarkable woman named Esther. Queen Esther was an exquisite beauty whose striking looks seemed to cross all ethnic lines. She was spotted by the people who chose women for the harem in the court of the Persian King. Apparently no one knew she was Jewish until politics got nasty. Someone in the Persian court convinced the king to wage a pogrom against the Jews, which would have wiped out thousands of innocent people.

To her credit Esther got involved. Oh she did not want to be involved. She was not political or brave, really. She was not anxious to tell anyone about her ethnic background but her uncle was watching the court intrigue as trouble brewed at the court of the most powerful emperor of the era. He saw the violence that was coming to the Jewish people. He contacted his niece in the harem by sending a messenger to her. Esther was hoping someone else would deal with this. She was not anxious to upset the Emperor. She knew he loved her more than most of the women, but she did not want to challenge him or take the risks that would come from asking him for help. In the end she was

persuaded that this was a moment where her voice was needed and she made some elaborate preparations. She prepared an elaborate feast and threw a dinner for the king. He was impressed and she invited him to another feast the next night so she could be sure he would listen. When he asked how he could re-pay her kindness, she asked him to spare her people. So she saved the Jews in Persia. She might have avoided this courageous act, but she became convinced that if she did not speak up she could not live with herself. What can we learn from this story for our lives today?

In the first place, the faces of justice are always the faces of people like you and me. What I love about the Esther story is that Esther was not looking for this moment when she played a pivotal role in world history. It found her. She was not hoping to be a hero and in fact would have preferred to just continue her life of beauty cleanses and spa treatments.

I saw the movie *Selma* this week and I really recommend it. I thought I knew all about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the work he did and the historic march he led from Selma to Montgomery. But I was wrong. There is a freshness in this film that makes the story both familiar and new at once. You see Dr. King become less of a legend and more of a man- a preacher who did not know what to do, a husband who was not always thoughtful about his wife even though he loved her and a father of four children whose safety was compromised by their father's prophetic voice for justice. He does not have all the answers or even know what to do. He worries about his wife's safety and wonders about how to make people see the plight of his people. He second guesses himself even as he blazes this new trail. The film makes it clear that the story of the Civil Rights movement is not just about him. There are plenty of heroes. It is a story about Rev. James Reeb, an enthusiastic UU minister from Boston who is brutally attacked in the streets of Selma. It is about Jimmy Lee Jackson a young black man who attended rallies and marched with his mother before the police murdered him. It is about a nurse's aide who follows the news on televisions in patient's rooms in a nursing home. Played by Oprah Winfrey, it is the story of an ordinary woman who applied to vote and was repeatedly humiliated by bureaucrats who forced her to recite the Declaration of Independence and bits of

arcane state geography which she could never master. Something about this woman played by an actor who feels so familiar reminds us of all the average people who stood up fifty years ago. This nurse's aide was knocked down by police and she got up. She was arrested and still she came back for more. I went to this movie expecting it to be about Dr. King, but came away feeling he is still something of an enigma. But I felt I knew his wife and all these other people so much better. They were the faces of justice in this film. The face of justice is always the faces of people like you and me.

Secondly the story of Esther reminds us that we have much more power than we realize to change the world. Esther was a woman in a world where women were seen and never heard. To speak was to risk your life. With no income, no vote, no status except her beauty, she was a small pawn in a big sexist chess game. She was hiding a secret – her racial identity. But her story reminds us that we all often under-estimate our power. We are aware of the strikes against us, but not our potential to make a difference.

Las Cruces, New Mexico is the second largest city in the state. A few years ago this section of town was overrun with homeless people who camped out in an industrial park near the charity offices. Drugs and violence were rampant and no one felt safe. Now things are different according to an article in the *New York Times* from earlier this month. {"A Glimmer of Hope" by Rick Rojas *New York Times* January 2, 2015 p. A11} On a rough stretch of the city, 50 homeless people have pitched tents. But this is not Detroit or Manhattan and the city has decided to encourage them to stay. They built platforms and created rules for the residents. The state has invested in porta-potties, some showers, a fence and landscaping. If you want to stay in this tent city you cannot bring in drugs or alcohol. You have to attend a community meeting, and work 6 hours a week for the community either standing guard or cleaning up. The experiment has been so successful that a veritable strip mall of social services has set up offices nearby. The homeless can go to a distribution center to get clothes or shoes donated by churches. They can talk to a social worker about permanent housing. The executive director of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope admits that she was initially skeptical. Her job had been to put people in

housing and now she was putting them in tents, which felt backward. She realized before long that the homeless people who lived there walked by the office every day and came to trust her. Soon they believed in themselves and sought her advice on how to get a permanent place to live. Social workers and city councilors are cautiously optimistic. There are still plenty of challenges. People are known to sneak away sometimes to drink or get a fix, but more and more folks have found that they can turn their lives around because finally they feel safe.

The stories of the Bible point to a different truth and one we often forget. Life may seem completely overwhelming, and our problems may seem intractable. But change is always an option. Justice is always the better choice. We have more power than we think.

Finally the world is depending on us. Uncle Mordechai told Esther – “Who knows but maybe you were born for this very moment?”

I had a funny conversation with my grand-daughter Ruth this week. She is six years old and a bit precocious; she knows enough to have strong opinions now. In a phone call last week she was telling me what she had learned about Dr. Martin Luther King and the march he led from Selma to Montgomery. I mentioned that my dad, her great grandfather was among the many ministers who joined in that march. It took a while for her to understand who he was, but she said.

“Grandma, does that mean you were alive when Martin Luther King lived?”

“Yes”

“Was that before women could vote?”

“No, it was black people that were having trouble voting, then.”

Then she said, “Why didn’t you march with Dr. King, grandma?”

“Well I did not know any kids who were marching then, and besides, I had to go to school. I was in fifth grade.”

“Well, children marched you know, Grandma.”

“I know that but it was not an option for me.”

It was a short interaction but it sticks with me because Ruth is growing up and asking bigger questions now. I can tell that this child will be holding me accountable for the dreams and hopes we all cherish. She believes with a child's fervor that it is possible to make the world a better place. She and all her generation will be watching us. That is a big responsibility.

So I can expect her to keep asking me questions about what I did or didn't do. I can image many more questions.

- “When people marched in Ferguson to let people know black lives matter, where were you Grandma?
- When people protested about the man who died on Staten Island what did you do?
- When handgun violence got out of control what did you do Grandma? When they shot those children in the school in Connecticut what did you do?
- When they shot that surgeon at Brigham and Women's did you work to keep guns out of the hands of the mentally ill Grandma?
- What did you do Grandma when the oceans rose and the glaciers melted?

Who knows but maybe we are the only ones God has right now? We are the people who God needs to be the faces of justice? We are the ones God needs to address the racial inequity. We are the only ones who can stop the trend toward violence in our time. We are the ones who have to stand up to the greed that is making our world unsafe and our climate so precarious. It may seem overwhelming but we are the generation in charge today. These issues are in our hands. Maybe we are here, all of us, for just this moment. Who knows?