

Where Do You Draw The Line?
Esther 2:19-3:6, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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As we turn to our reading in Esther this morning, there's a sense, at least at the beginning, that we're due for a breather. However it happened, Esther has become Queen, and in celebration of that there's a tax cut for everyone and party favors all around.

Chapter two ends with an account that seems almost insignificant at this point. Mordecai gets wind of an assassination plot that two of the King's eunuchs are planning and he relays the information on the Esther, who passes it to Ahasuerus, who investigates it and takes care of business.

Now, given what we know about Ahasuerus in particular and ancient Persian kings in general, just take a guess at what you think might happen if you were the one who saved his life. As we have discussed, everything about this guy is over the top – he is the king of excess, right? So we might imagine that when Mordecai flushes out these traitors, that there's going to be a little something in it for him, don't we? It's not too much to expect that maybe Ahasuerus would throw Mordecai a bone, right?

So when chapter three begins with "After these things King Ahasuerus promoted..." we think we know what's coming next. Mordecai has a fat bonus heading his way, right? Wrong. It's Haman who gets the corner office. We don't know much about him, other than he's said to be an Agagite. While that doesn't mean much to you and to me, when the original hearers of this story heard that Haman was an Agagite, they knew to boo and hiss at his name. If Mordecai is "our player" for the "children of God" team, then Haman is clearly the villain.

Agag was the name of a King who tried, unsuccessfully, to destroy God's people back in 1 Samuel chapter 14 and 15. Over the centuries, Jews sometimes used the term "Agagite" to refer to anyone who was an enemy of Judaism, regardless of whether or not there was a biological connection to this particular King. So when we learn that Haman is an Agagite, we all hiss and boo because we already know that he's the bad guy in this story.

And what makes it worse is that here the bad guy gets what ought to be coming to the good guy. Who saved the King's life? Mordecai. Who gets the leather furniture? Haman. It's not fair, I tell you.

But it gets worse for Mordecai. Haman had so impressed Ahasuerus that the King set up a law that everyone had to pay him "obeisance" when he passed by. In other words, everyone had to fall down on his or her face and honor Haman. Mordecai will not do this. Why? Because he's a Jew. What does that

have to do with it? Well, there are two schools of thought here. One is that Mordecai is a proud man who knew that Haman was an Agagite, and as such, Mordecai refuses to bow to any person who represents someone who tried to destroy the people of God. The early Greek translation of this story states explicitly that the reason that Mordecai didn't bow to Haman was because he did not want to give any human the kind of respect that is due to God alone.

No matter what the reason, it's clear that Mordecai broke the law and infuriated Haman. In fact, it's worth noting a little pun that shows up in the Hebrew verse 5. Our reading says, that when Mordecai did not bow, "Haman was filled with fury". The word for "fury" is the Hebrew *hemah* – so literally, it says that Haman was full of *hemah*. He was so full of it, in fact, that the text tells us that he wasn't content to waste that kind of anger on one person, but that he wanted to erase Mordecai's entire race from the earth – so Haman, the Agagite, lives into his name and begins to plot to destroy God's people.

This text raises three questions for us to consider this morning. The first two questions are ethical questions, and they are intertwined. What do you do when someone else gets credit for your work? After all, Mordecai spared the king, but Haman got the promotion. That's not right. And the second question is almost like it: what do you do when you get stuck with something that you don't deserve? You can argue about whether or not Mordecai deserved to be punished for breaking the king's law about bowing to Haman, but you can be sure of the fact that the eleven year old neighbor kid didn't deserve it – but here is Haman, filled with *hemah*, planning to do the kid and his grandmother and all the Jews in. That's not right.

And at first, the answer to each of these first two questions seems simple. What do you do? You do the right thing. You become, as Mordecai might say, a "stand-up guy". What does that mean? Well, in this context, it evidently means that you don't need to insist on your own way or demand things to be the way that you want them to be, and that you do not compromise your core values, either. You do the right thing.

What does that mean? Well, for some people, this passage has been an encouragement as they seek to be faithful to God in the midst of a culture that doesn't really value such faithfulness. For instance, the first-century Christians lived at a time when the Roman Emperor was claiming that he was not just a man, he was a god. As a token of respect for his divinity, residents of the Empire were required to burn incense to an image of the Emperor. More than one Christian lost his or her life because, just as Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, they refused to worship the Emperor. That kind of application is pretty cut and dried.

But what about us? What are we supposed to take from this reading? Again, sometimes it's easy to say what is "doing the right thing". You are eating lunch and you hear a group of people at the next table harassing someone else because of that person's race or sexual orientation. Is it easy to stand up and

say, “Hey, knock it off”? Is it easy to walk over and sit with the person who is being abused? Of course it’s not easy. But we’re pretty sure that it’s right, and here scripture seems plain that we ought to do what is right, not what is easy.

But the ethical question goes a little deeper than that. What about when what’s right isn’t always that plain to see? Let’s say that you have a job and you are paid to work from 8 – 5 every day. But every day, the boss seems to have something a little extra for you to do – and you never get out before 6. It’s not a huge deal, but it’s not anything you’re getting paid to do. You need the job, but you’re not being treated fairly. What’s the right thing?

Or maybe the boss is treating you all right, but every now and then she comes to you with a request to add a few extra expenses to the invoice that you’re preparing. You know that these are unnecessary and inaccurate, but again, you really need the job and besides, it’s not your call. What’s the right thing?

Or maybe you’re doing pretty well in one of your classes and you really seem to understand the material. You have a lab report due on Tuesday, but you’re finished with it on Monday and you put it in the teacher’s basket in the main office. As you are across the room engaged in conversation with someone else, you notice another student coming into the room and taking your paper out of the basket – this student is clearly planning to use your research for his grade – a kind of cheating that is totally wrong. But this student is also twice your size and known to be violent. You are addicted to breathing. So what do you do?

You see what I mean? It’s fairly easy to be the guy standing up here wagging his finger at you and reminding you to “do the right thing”. It’s a lot harder when the right thing is hard to see. How do you know what you ought to do? Let me offer a few ideas:

First, recognize that what is right is often costly. Being a person of integrity has a price tag, and as soon as we know that, it’s easier to follow through.

Second, keep doing what you’re doing now. That is, look for Godly wisdom through the scriptures and the wisdom of the church. Put yourself in a place where you’ll be able to hear God’s leading and God’s voice when it comes to you.

And thirdly – and perhaps most difficultly – seek Godly wisdom and counsel from other believers. Open your life up to the people of God and ask someone to help you know what is right in any given situation. This is tough, I think, because we don’t like to admit when we’re struggling. And we don’t want to seem stupid or soft. And we don’t want to seem less than holy, sometimes, when we’re around other Christians. But I think that this is an area where each of us can grow by leaps and bounds – simply opening our lives to others in our community and asking them to wait, to watch, and to pray with us in any given

situation.

So I said that there were three questions, and I've only given you two. As I said, the first two questions - what do you do when someone else is honored while you are ignored, and what do you do when you are stuck with something that you don't deserve – these are ethical questions. They are about what we DO. The third question is a question that would have occurred immediately to Mordecai and his neighbors, and it's a theological question.

Do you remember how it is that Mordecai came to be living in Susa, the capital of Persia? His people had been defeated in war and brought to Susa as exiles, right? And why had they been defeated? The Old Testament is pretty clear: God's people had neglected God's covenant. God had said, "You will be my people and I will be your God", but the people began to worship other gods. And in punishment, God sent Nebuchadnezzar into Jerusalem and he took the people away.

Obviously, not all of the people were unfaithful. But as a people, they had broken covenant with God. As a result of that, they lost their nation and their independence – but they still had some relationship with God and they still had themselves. Now, Haman is proposing genocide. Wipe them all out. And Mordecai and his neighbors have a question: since our people broke the covenant with God, does that mean that God intends to break faith with us? In other words, God had promised that we would be his chosen people and that he would send a messiah – but we broke the deal. Does that mean that God intends to turn his back on us and allow us to perish?

Now that's a scary question. Or it ought to be, at least for anyone who has ever turned his or her back on God. Is God willing to break faith with his own promises, since we have demonstrated time and time again our willingness to do the same? Is there hope? Or am I sunk?

That's the tension that is generated in Esther chapter 2 and 3. Are God's people an endangered species? Or to be more specific, does God have it in for me or for you based on something that we did last night, last week, last year?

You'll have to come back to hear what happens next in the book of Esther, but the good news from Corinthians is that even when we are in terrible and difficult circumstances, God does not turn away from us. The truth is that there is nothing that you can do that will remove you from God's love. You may experience consequences of decisions that you make; you may go through times of weariness and testing; but you will not find the problem that is too perplexing for God. Go ahead and finish Esther's story if you want and see you it works out for Mordecai. And go ahead and finish your own story, too. Work on doing what is right, but lean on God's promise to pull you through. Amen.