

**October 12, 2014**  
**TEXT: Esther 4:10-17**  
**TITLE: Crossing a Line**

250 years ago, philosopher Edmund Burke coined the famous phrase: *All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing*. It is a great oratorical flourish, a turn of phrase intended to be a call to action (similar to other great lines from history like “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” “Damn the torpedos – full speed ahead,” and “Buy one, get one free!” OK, maybe not that last example.) What must be noted, however, is that these inspirational phrases are only necessary because we do not always act when we ought to. Often we hate to get involved. We don’t want to put ourselves at risk and are happy just to stay out of things. For every Edmund Burke rallying the people, there are dozens of others telling us, “Don’t make waves.” “Just go along to get along.” “It’s someone else’s problem.”

No one wants evil to triumph. But how do we know when we should get involved? When do we stick our necks out and cross the line from inaction to action? Queen Esther, a beautiful, pious Jewish girl recently brought into the royal household of King Ahasuerus, faced this dilemma herself. A decree has gone forth calling for the death of all Jews in the kingdom – a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Holocaust. Esther has been living a sequestered life behind the palace walls until word reaches her from her uncle Mordecai that something must be done about the impending pogrom. Esther, like so many of us, initially believes there is nothing she can do. She is not the right person for the job and besides, the risks are too great. Mordecai replies back that the palace walls will not protect her from this impending wave of violence. He then offers his own famous turn of phrase and says, *“Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”*

For such a time as this. There are moments in our lives in which situations present themselves and we find ourselves thinking, “Something needs to be done and perhaps I have to be the one to do it.” Haven’t we all been there at some time or another? Think about some examples of these situations. Someone you care for is drinking too much, popping pills, gambling, being dishonest at work or in relationships – so the next step is to confront him or her and do an intervention. Someone around you says things that are racist, homophobic, misogynist and rather than treat it like a joke, you know it needs to be challenged. Your work place is doing something unethical that puts people at risk; someone needs to be a whistleblower but it may cost you your job. In all these situations, you stand on one side of a line and you have to decide whether or not to cross that line – to get involved and speak out. You know it’s the right thing to do, but that doesn’t make it any easier.

Crossing a line involves courage – the courage to overcome the obstacles and your own fears in order to act for the greater good. Some people talk about

having the courage of your convictions. That simply means your public actions correspond to your private beliefs, your faith values.<sup>1</sup> It need not be a big action – a “Rosa Parks staying seated on the Montgomery bus” type of action. It can be quiet and particular; but even though it may be small, it still requires a fair amount of inner courage. Derrick Bell is a New York University law professor and civil rights activist who was raised in Pittsburgh in the Hill District. He remembers a time when he was only six or seven years old when his mother took him down to the rent office. She stood in front of the teller’s window, took cash from her purse and waved it in front of the clerk. She told the man, “This is the rent money. I have it – and you will get it when you fix the back steps so that my children won’t fall and hurt themselves.” This was during the Great Depression and the family could have been evicted for nonpayment of rent. When Mr. Bell asked his mother what happened next, even years later, she beamed and said, “They fixed the steps and they fixed all the steps along the row houses where we lived.”<sup>2</sup>

Bell went on to say that we should never assume that speaking out in defense of ourselves or others will always have the worst possible consequences. Instead we should assume that not speaking out is the very thing that may lead to the outcome we consider least desirable of all.<sup>3</sup> Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes has said, “Courage is when you believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, and good in the face of evil.”<sup>4</sup>

We have named today Accessibility Sunday and part of our time together involves considering ways we can help all people worship and share their gifts on Sunday morning. We have Jessica here for sign-language interpretation. We adjusted our chancel space so that Kay and Mark can serve as liturgists this morning. I know that these are imperfect answers to complex problems. For example, the ramp and platform still don’t make our chancel area fully accessible. But you have to ask the questions and try things out that may fail if you ever hope to find solutions that are just and radically hospitable to all.

On a deeper level, though, accessibility is a metaphor. To talk about accessibility is to ask about barriers to what is right. Glass ceilings and pay inequity are accessibility issues. Racism and flaws in our criminal justice system are accessibility issues. Being afraid to “come out,” to be honest about your sexual orientation to your family or where you work is an accessibility issue. Whatever blocks access to power, to civil rights, to justice is something that draws a line in the sand and eventually we have to decide, “Do I cross that line or not? Who knows? Maybe I was put here for just such a time as this.”

In thinking about when to get involved in a messy situation, I’d like to give you some advice. Preachers do that. They give advice. Today I’m going to give you “LOTA” advice. Not “a lot of” advice, but “L-O-T-A” advice. It’s a 4-letter acronym to help you remember what to do when you faithfully decide to cross a line and take action. And the source of this LOT A advice is Queen Esther from long ago.

First, L - listen for God. When Esther heard the horrible news from Mordecai, at some point she stopped being passive and took charge of the situation. She sent word for all the Jews to gather together and fast – to humble themselves and seek to discern God’s will for this time of crisis. To fast is an act of faith, believing that as we suppress our own needs and inclinations we are more aware of what God would have us do. By quieting ourselves we are able to hear the still, small voice of our loving God. So the first step is “listen for God.”

Second, O – Observe. Look around. Gather information. Choose wisely when you want to initiate a difficult conversation. Figure out the best times to act or ways to communicate so that you will have the greatest chance for success. In the story about Mrs. Bell, she showed the rent collector her money and her children so that the man would fully understand the sincerity of her motives. In the story about Esther, she observed the way things worked in the palace. She knew the daily schedule and that no one outside the king’s immediate circle of advisors could enter into his presence without being invited. And she knew that whatever plan she hoped to carry out, it would have to be quite clever, because her enemy was the king’s favorite counselor. God has given us five senses, plus senses of intuition and compassion and spirits of righteousness and courage. God wants you to use all these things in the pursuit of justice – so be observant and wise for the Lord.

Third, T – Trust. Remember Gomes’ quote about having the courage to believe in love in the face of evil and good in the face of evil? Faith is that part of you that trusts in the good news of Jesus Christ and believes that this world, God’s world, is ultimately grounded on goodness, mercy, and love. Esther didn’t have a great plan. On the third day she put on her best robes and simply stood in an inner hall across from the king’s throne room. He hadn’t called for her in over a month. She had no reason to believe her appearing in the vicinity of the king would accomplish anything, but she trusted her instincts. She trusted her intuition. She trusted that the Lord would provide – and make a way out of no way. Isaiah 12:2 says, “*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.*”

Fourth, A – Act. Cross that line. Break the silence. Do so, not solely out of your own woundedness or needs, but for the common good. Act to bring healing to that person before you who is a child of God yet captive to something that is destroying her or his life. Act to bring hope to that person who has said “I won’t step into a church. I hate hard pews, hymns and hypocrites” when in truth, they are hoping desperately to find peace and acceptance for their hurting soul. Act, like Malala, the young Pakistani woman and most recent Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Act, like Esther, whose God gave her the courage to stand so that the king might see her – the courage to speak when the king called her forward – and the courage to act and invite the king and his evil counselor to dinner, so that she might plead for justice for her oppressed people.

It's LOTA advice: Listen for God. Observe. Trust. Act. Esther did it. So can you. Full access to justice, peace and righteousness comes when good men and women do something. Healing broken lives and broken institutions happens when we shine the light of Christ into places of darkness. You'll know when you have to cross a line – when you listen, observe, trust, and act for just such a time as this.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Derrick Bell, Ethical Ambition, 2002, p. 49

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.