

September 18, 2016

TEXT: Esther 4:5–14

TITLE: When the Personal is Political

Queen Esther's life was complicated. She was a Jew in a time of exile. She was an orphan brought up in her cousin's home. She was a woman living in Persia in an era where women had little power or agency. Sure she was queen, but even *that* was complicated.

You might remember that Esther wasn't even the first woman to be King Xerxes' queen. She was chosen to replace Queen Vashti who was ousted after refusing to obey one of the King's orders. An example was made of Queen Vashti, the Bible tells us, so that the other women in the kingdom wouldn't get any bright ideas and start to disobey their husbands too. So now Esther is queen—not because the king loved her or valued her opinion. She was queen simply because of her beauty, an anonymous woman paraded in front of the most powerful man in the land and chosen on appearance.

And now we learn that the honeymoon is over. She hasn't seen her husband in 30 days, and the law dictates that she cannot approach her own husband unless he calls for her—or else she will be killed. Her husband doesn't even know she is a Jew.

When we meet up with Esther for today, we learn that her cousin, Mordecai, the man who raised her is trying to inform her of an edict issued by the king's right-hand-man, Haman. Haman's decree will result in the slaughter of the Jews. Mordecai is terrified. He is in mourning for what might be. He recognizes that Esther is his only hope. So he challenges Esther to decide if she will risk her life and advocate for her people, or if she will sit back and let matters take their course. Mordecai reminds her, however, that not even she will be spared if the Jews are slaughtered. Even a queen cannot escape her birthright.

Life can sure get messy fast! In Esther's story we see that when we combine the profound ignorance of a narcissistic leader with the greed of top advisors and the systemic injustice and collective disenfranchisement toward multiple classes of people, we get a playing field filled with landmines. And when you add lots of alcohol, ego, and hasty decisions into the mix, no one is truly safe.

And it is in the middle of this mess that Esther has to decide: to sit back or to do something. How is she to respond? What might God be calling her to do?

There are plenty of messes in our world today. They shake us up and they set the context for our life together in small and large ways: from the Liberty Bridge being shut down to Samsung Galaxy 7s catching fire to the rhetoric of the presidential campaign. The society in which we live is rich with complexity—some of it quite beautiful, and some of it outright tough.

On this stage we make our choices and lead our lives. On this stage we must consider the risks we take and the impact of our inaction. And perhaps, like Esther, it is on this stage that we must stop to weigh the consequences of our choices—and how those consequences might effect us, those we love, those we don't know...and even how those choices impact our relationship with God.

If we 'fessed up right now, we'd likely admit—here, among friends—that many of the choices in our life are made little with little deliberation: we order the same coffee in the morning; we hop on the bus at the same stop a few blocks away from our home; we slip into the same black shoes on our way out the door. We do so much on autopilot because there is, frankly, so much to do all of the time.

It's impossible to trace every ripple of every choice we make. And even if it weren't—who has the time for such legwork? That's a lot of data to capture and analyze and, well, make choices about!

But the story of Esther reminds us that sometimes we do have to stop and look around. We have to notice our location and our situation—and then look out and see where others fall into the mix too. Then we have to choose: sit back or jump in, even if the work ahead comes at a cost.

Social Scientist Eric Liu challenges us, to at the very least take time to understand the society in which we live, and to trace the dynamics of power in our culture and in the world. He says:

The problem we face today, here in America in particular, but all around the world, is that far too many people are profoundly illiterate in power—what it is, who has it, how it operates, how it flows, what part of it is visible, what part of it is not, why some people have it, why that's compounded. And as a result of this illiteracy, those few who do understand how power operates in civic life, those who understand how a bill becomes a law, yes, but also how a friendship becomes a subsidy, or how a bias becomes a policy, or how a slogan becomes a movement, the people who understand those things wield disproportionate influence, and they're perfectly happy to fill the vacuum created by the ignorance of the great majority.¹

But, he goes on to say: "...the art of practicing power means being awake and having a voice...it also is about having an arena where you can plausibly practice deciding."²

So what does this mean for us?

Let's go back in time a few decades: 1969, Women's Rights Activist Carol Hanisch wrote a paper that inherited the name "The Personal Is Political." In it she writes of the

¹ Liu, Eric: Why ordinary people need to understand power|TED Talk.

https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_liu_why_ordinary_people_need_to_understnad_power.

² *ibid.*

political value of marginalized persons finding a forum for collectively telling their personal truths, for interpreting their meaning, for taking a look at the playing field and calling it like they see it. She says: “*It is a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve always been told to say.*”³ Truth telling leads to collective action. Collective action leads to social change.

In both Esther’s context and our own, we benefit if we remember that even for us *the personal is political—and that the political is personal*. Too often politics plays out on the media stage in the context of personality. It looks like a reality TV show, and we forget that we are more than spectators—we are the actors. We are the ones with the votes (whether we’re casting someone off the island, handing out a red rose, or pointing to someone and saying: “you’re fired.”). We are reminded—by Hanisch and Liu and Mordecai and Esther and Black Lives Matter and Sojourner Truth and Jesus that the truth of our lives matter, that our choices have power, that inaction is an action unto itself.

When Esther’s consciousness was raised and she saw what was going on around her, she realized—perhaps to her dismay—that she couldn’t sit still. She realized that the back room political deals and upper level machinations had life-or-death impact on HER life and the lives of her loved ones. Politics was not a spectator sport—it was an arena in which the distribution of power had a genuine effect on her own intimate life.

Jesus too addressed this marriage between the personal and the political throughout the gospels: when a woman anointed his feet at the Pharisee’s home, or when he healed the man on the Sabbath, or had dinner with Zacchaeus or when he welcomed the children to himself. Throughout the gospels, Jesus claims love and welcome and mercy even when it challenges authority or disrupts the status quo. He stands up for the marginalized and speaks the truth, even when it is risky to himself or troubles those in power. He notices that every choice impacts a person’s life—on a profoundly intimate level—and that it is through these small but significant choices that we weave justice and mercy and love into the fabric of our world as God’s ambassadors of grace.

The same is true for us today. What we eat, where we shop, how we love, how we educate our kids, how we travel, what we say...all of these choices count whether we realize it or not. They make statements about what we believe, about what we value, about what and who we hope to be. They say things about our investment in others, our compassion for this world, our priorities and needs.

We have an opportunity before us. We have a choice to make. We can choose to sit back. We can take ourselves as far away from the playing field and hope that we’ll stay away from the drama. Or, we can enter into the mess. We can allow our minds to be opened, our consciousness to be raised. We can then act—we can stand up for someone who is left out, even if there is a cost; we can speak up for the truth we know, even if it is unpopular; we can vote!

³ Hanisch, Carol. “The Personal Is Political”. 1969.

What is God calling you to do? What burden rests on your heart? MLK reminds us: "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but (she or) he must take it because conscience tells (them) it is right."

Politics is not a game, nor is it entertainment. Politics is not the responsibility of the few, elected to office. Politics is about how decisions are made that guide our civic life together. Politics set standards for the schools in which our children are educated, the insurance that pays for our medical procedures, the opportunities we have to live in the house that best suits our family even if the members of our family have brown skin or love a person of the same gender or need to use a wheel chair. Politics govern the ingredients in the food we eat, the importing or exporting of goods or labor. Politics determine if we go to war or not. Politics impact our daily lives—literally, the air we breathe. Politics are PERSONAL, and the most personal intimate details of our lives are political.

We are called to courageously engage this discussion. We are called to step out of our comfort zones so that we might be instruments in this world through which God's liberating justice or welcoming love or radical peace might prevail. Only by engaging in the tough questions, by calling out injustice, by advocating for civil rights, and by casting a vote can we do our part, with God's help, to get things back on track. It may take patience and persistence, but as long as we have a voice and a breath we can, as Gandhi put it, "be the change we wish to see in the world."

Throughout the summer, Native Americans have banded together in peaceful protest, supporting the efforts of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. At stake: water, the most essential element necessary for survival. Protesters argue that the pipeline's proximity to the Missouri River has the potential to be lethal for those living downstream, should the pipeline break. It is too great a risk to take. The personal is political. The political is personal. So together they joined in truth telling, prayerful discernment, collective action—and slowly their voices are being heard.

What need do you see in the world around you? What truth do you have to tell? What story have you heard lately that keeps you up at night, wondering what to do. Let yourself be troubled, but don't be afraid. See, God's got you. Christ is with you. The Spirit will equip you. For perhaps you were brought to this place, filled up with your gifts, given your voice...for such a time as this.

Amen