

August 8, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [Esther 1](#)

TITLE: A Tale of Three Banquets – Esther part 1

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I want to begin with a story, not about a royal queen, but about jazz royalty—the first lady of song, Ella Fitzgerald. The African American author James McBride, back in 1982, was a young reporter for the Boston Globe. He'd been sent to cover Harvard University's Woman of the Year ceremony honoring Ella Fitzgerald. The theater was packed with students and when she came to the podium, one young voice piped out, "Sing, Ella." Soon others joined the chorus, shouting "Sing, Ella, sing."

McBride wrote that he watched, fuming. Fitzgerald had already sung on demand for lots of audiences. She'd sung for 40 years, in clubs and juke joints, in filthy bars and rancid watering holes, as well as concert halls around the world. She was basically orphaned at 15 years old, bounced between reform school and the New York streets during the Great Depression, before she happened to be picked during an amateur night at the Harlem Apollo Theater to come on stage and sing something. Sing she did—and it led to becoming a vocalist with Chick Webb's orchestra and making her way to the top of the music world. But that night at Harvard, she was 64, tired and plagued by diabetes, and these privileged kids wanted her to sing on demand. McBride thought, "Sing your own damn selves."

But the First Lady of Song was gracious. She stood at the mic and sang a verse from "I've Got a Crush on You." McBride remembered her grace in that moment. She'd endured more pain and suffering than he knew or would ever know. Yet he knew it was she who chose when to use her gifts, when to share her talent and that memory stayed with him through the years.¹

I tell this story because it captures the moment when a crowd, usually of men, calls out for someone, usually a woman, to perform for them—to do as they bid, when they bid, whatever they bid. Ella Fitzgerald made a choice to sing that day. Queen Vashti made a different choice. Both were expressions of God-given grace and power.

The opening chapter of the book of Esther describes a gathering much more debased than the Harvard event. King Ahasuerus has been throwing a banquet solely designed to flaunt his wealth—to awe those in attendance, high-born and low-born alike, with his riches and power. After days on a drunken bender, the king decided that in addition to the other ornaments of wealth already displayed, his queen should be paraded before the inebriated masses. "Call forth Queen Vashti!" went out the cry. "And be sure she wears her crown." Why that detail? There were likely dozens of other attractive maidens already in the banquet hall, servants, powerless and identity-less except for their roles in meeting the needs of others. So to distinguish one more female servant from the others, he wanted to be sure the queen wore a crown.

When the order was delivered to her, Queen Vashti refused to come. It was an act of defiance, of refusing to be ogled, objectified and demeaned at the behest of a drunken man. It was a risky decision, as such decisions usually are. Margaret Atwood once described this dynamic quite bluntly. She said that when she asked a male friend why men feel threatened by women, he answered, “They are afraid women will laugh at them.” When she asked a group of women why they feel threatened by men, they said, “We’re afraid of being killed.”² As President Biden said years ago as a Senator, “the single greatest danger to a woman’s health is violence from men.”

Saying “No” has consequences. For Queen Vashti, it cost her a crown and her place of honor. To soften the tension of the moment, the biblical story moves into farce. It describes King Ahasuerus throwing a fit when he heard Vashti’s refusal. He gathered a cluster of advisors to tell him how to deal with this act of defiance—a cabal of clowns whose only priority was soothing ruffled royal feathers. They warned that Vashti’s disobedience could prompt all wives to disobey their husbands; therefore a royal edict must be written forbidding such things! So that’s what he did. He sought to legislate misogyny—to embed in law an injustice contrary to God’s laws and human wisdom. It was an over-the-top response meant to cause us to roll our eyes in disbelief. Every woman and ideally every man knows that when a relationship is shaped by force and hierarchy instead of respect and mutuality, something is seriously wrong.

Vashti spoke up by saying “No” and refused to be complicit with Ahasuerus’ misogyny and disrespect. She is part of a great universal sisterhood that has broken the silence and pushed back on male oppression. Think of Sojourner Truth’s famous speech in 1851, when she heard male speaker after male speaker question women’s rights until she finally got to her feet and said these words: *That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles—and ain’t I a woman? Then that little man in black there says women can’t have as much rights as men ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.*³

Or think about Mary Magdalene, who refused to be pushed to the margins by men, but always found a way to be near to Christ—to help, comfort, honor and serve him. When Christ had been crucified and laid in the tomb, she went there early in the morning only to discover to her horror that his grave had been disturbed—apparently robbed. When all the world wanted to dishonor this man, she refused to accept that behavior. She looked for the body, first in the tomb, and then by questioning someone whom she took to be a gardener. She spoke up—she broke the silence and said, “Look, if you’ve moved the body, tell me where they have taken him so I may bring him back.” In that act of devotion and by speaking up, Mary’s eyes were opened and she saw the resurrected Christ that day.

Think about Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, brave women saying “Enough is enough. I will shape my own history, safeguard my own health, and not be a pawn for others’ entertainment.” Think about the #metoo movement and the courage of women to finally

break the silence to tell of harassment and sexual violence inflicted on them by men in positions of power. Think of Professor Christine Blasey Ford. Invariably when a woman comes forward with an allegation of a sexual assault from many years earlier, someone cynically asks “Why now?” Well, there wouldn’t be the need to ask “Why now?” if women were believed the first time—believed when they broke the silence, when they tell of abuse, when they remind the world sadly how often they have to say “No.”

Beth and I spent last week up at the Chautauqua Institution. The theme of the week was empathy—how to better understand it and incorporate it into our faith life and common life. Empathy involves being compassionate and kind. It is the ability to be vulnerable, especially with those pushed to the margins and overlooked by others. It not only involves walking in someone else’s shoes, but knowing what it means to walk around in your own shoes, carrying around your own woundedness and biases, your own complicity with injustice and racism. Thanks to this time at Chautauqua, I realized something about the opening chapter of the book of Esther. Queen Vashti may have refused to appear before the drunken king, but the first refusal of that day—the original sin of this story was when Ahasuerus lacked empathy, the wisdom and kindness and basic respect to understand what he was asking of his queen. The first “no” of this story wasn’t the woman’s; it was the man’s.

The writers of the folktale around Esther knew that this story needed to communicate on lots of levels. So it starts with a drunken banquet, with a spoiled, petulant king and a strong woman who refuses to be made less than what God intended for her—a beloved, valued, child of God. Vashti never entered the room, but her powerful presence—her strength to say “No” despite the consequences—left a lasting impression. And over the years, others like her have spoken up, spoken out, and let their voices be heard. Sojourner Truth saying, “Ain’t I a woman?” Ella Fitzgerald modeling grace and strength, telling a crowd, “It isn’t where you came from; it’s where you’re going that counts.” Women speaking up to tell of abuse, to say #metoo, to say “Never again.” And to these voices, the ancient scriptures add their wisdom—*Proverbs: Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy*; and *John’s* gospel, when the one assumed to be a gardener turned out to be the risen Christ, who called Mary by her name and made her the first apostle, the first preacher of the good news, saying “*Go now to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my God and your God.*”

Long ago a story was told about a banquet where one woman had the strength to say “No.” She stood for what is right and just, a proud daughter of the living God. Vashti never entered that room, but she awaits us just beyond every door. Let us go forth to honor her and all her daughters.

AMEN

¹ James McBride, “Jazzed,” review of Toni Morrison’s book *The Source of Self-Regard*, NY Times Book Review, March 3, 2019, p. 10.

² Quoted by Mary Dickson, “A Woman’s Worst Nightmare,” WQED, 1996.

³ Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman,” speech at Women’s Rights Convention, Akron, OH, 1851.