

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, August 14, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Esther 1:1-2:4, 16-17 (NRSVUE)

[trigger warning about sexual harassment]

[prayer]

If you are familiar with the Book of Esther at all, it is probably with the story of the book's namesake – Esther, a Jewish orphan who becomes the queen of Persia and saves the Jews from extermination by the empire.

Esther is mostly a book of fiction written to entertain, although it does contain some notes of historical truth. The Jews did once live under Persian rule, and Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name for the Persian emperor, Xerxes, who reigned in the fifth century BCE.

The book is marked by ironic, and sometimes comedic, reversals of fate. Hierarchies are overturned; the powerless raised up and the powerful brought low. Queen Vashti's royal demotion is only the first example.

[pause]

When I was a girl, I was taught to scorn Vashti. She thumbed her nose at her husband and got what she deserved. If only she had known her place, she would have remained queen. Instead, I was told, a young woman should seek to be like Esther: pure, virtuous, deferential. A woman's influence is in her charm and beauty; this is how she will win favor with her husband and society.

This interpretation sells both Vashti and Esther short. Esther is in fact incredibly courageous. She knows what Ahasuerus did to Vashti when she displeased him. She knows that she, too, could lose her crown if she puts just one toe out of line. And yet, despite her youth and inexperience, she dares to go before the king and plead for the lives of her people. When Esther becomes aware of the Persian official Haman's plot to kill the Jews, Esther's uncle, Mordecai, famously says to her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). Esther uses what little power and position she has to advocate for those with none. She is a reminder to all of us that our own power and position should also be used to serve those with less than us.

But Vashti's courage is a different kind than Esther's. While Esther turns an unjust power to her advantage, Vashti rejects that power altogether.

The backdrop for Vashti's courage is a banquet, a lavish affair that has lasted seven full days and nights. Some traditions claim that the banquet was a wedding reception for the marriage of Ahasuerus and Vashti. In any case, the banquet is intended to demonstrate the wealth and power of the Persian Empire. King Ahasuerus commands vast tracts of land, from India to Ethiopia, and on this land sits vassal states that bring him tribute in the form of food, wine, and gold.

The men and women dine together, but when the meal concludes, the women leave so the men can start drinking. The alcohol is flowing freely, and Ahasuerus becomes quite drunk. He has spent the week impressing his guests with his wealth; now he wants to impress them with his beautiful wife. He calls for Vashti to be brought before the court wearing the royal crown...and possibly *only* the royal crown – her naked body paraded before a room full of men.

The king is accustomed to owning many things, and that sense of ownership extends to his wife's body. She is just another 'thing' to show off. I wish Ahasuerus's disrespect was a relic of the past, but women's bodies continue to be objectified, abused, and exploited for the pleasure of others. And when a woman, like Vashti, sets boundaries around her body, she often pays a steep social price. At minimum, her boundaries are questioned. At worst, they are violated, and she is then told she deserved the abuse she received.

Vashti's refusal to appear before the court sparks a national crisis. The king's officials fear that her rebellion will inspire similar rebellion in homes across the empire. So, they pass a law declaring that every man shall be master of his wife and his home. And then they strip Vashti of her royal title and remove her from the palace.

This part of the story is intended to be comically absurd. Is the king's ego really so fragile that he has to pass a law to protect it? Ironically, Vashti's punishment – that she may never again show herself before the king – is exactly what she wanted!

Still, it took guts for Vashti to say no to the king and risk his displeasure. It took guts to say no to her husband and risk their marriage. It took guts to value her integrity over her royal privilege, to stand alone in a sea of courtiers bowing and scraping for the king's favor.

This story is ultimately about power: Who has it, who receives it, and who loses it. At first glance Vashti appears to possess a lot of power; she is queen of Persia, after all. But she is also a woman, which made her largely powerless in a male-dominated society.

Part of our work as followers of Jesus is to attend to the power differentials in our society. Society holds that power belongs to those with physical strength, wealth, education, and privilege; and there are churches and theologies that believe the more power and privilege a person has, the more favored they are by God. But Jesus upends our notions of what it means to have power and who ought to have it. Though he had equality with God, he gave that up to minister to the least among us. And he taught that God does not grant favor based on race, gender, merit, skill, or wealth; God's favor is an extension of God's grace, and grace is not earned. It is a gift freely given.

Jesus teaches that “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt 20:16). Or an alternative translation: “The powerless will be empowered, and the powerful will be disempowered.” Though her story in the Book of Esther ends with the loss of her royal crown, I do not think Vashti went away from that palace entirely powerless. No, she left empowered, personally if not socially, precisely because she took a bold and solo stand against the king. The bravery and courage it takes to stand up to unjust authority is a kind of power, too.

Unfortunately, I could not see that as a young girl. I loved the fairy tale of Esther becoming queen and saving her people. Vashti's story is grittier and doesn't have a happy ending. But that also makes it more realistic. When I think about how I was taught to look with scorn upon Vashti's bold and courageous 'no,' I feel sad that the church did not teach me better. I feel angry for every person that has stood up for themselves, only to be told by their faith community that they should keep quiet and not rock the boat. I feel frustrated for every person that has been punished for taking a righteous but unpopular stand. And I feel ashamed of all the times I kept silent in the face of another person's abuse and oppression, instead of standing next to them in solidarity with their struggle for justice.

The things we were taught when we were young are not always true, and they are not always good. This includes some church teachings. But another beautiful part of God's grace is that when we finally know better, we have the invitation to do better.

Theologian Karl Barth once said, "Keep the Bible in one hand and a newspaper [news app?] in the other." Our reading of Scripture informs how we engage the issues of our time – we engage them through the lens of the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches us to pay attention to the stories of those who have the least amount of power in our society, and the stories of those who speak up and stand up and step out in faith alone. These are the everyday faces of faith that we are called to attend to as Christians.

I'll finish by pointing out that in our Scripture lesson we never hear Vashti's voice. Her story is told entirely in the third person. If as Christians we are called to attend to the least among us, then that means paying close attention to whose voices get heard, whose stories get told, and whose do not. Vashti's story is usually read as a simple set-up for the longer, more influential story of Esther. But I chose her story as part of this worship series because it begs the question: Which voices and stories in our community will we choose to elevate here at Community UMC?

[pause]

Amen.