

One of the enduring truths of human history, tragically, has been the denigration and degradation of women. Time after time, country after country, women are treated as, at best, second class citizens and, at worst, are abused, assaulted, and abased. In our culture this is true. Women are disproportionately victims of violence, are sexually assaulted at alarming rates, and are subjected to harrassment in all walks of life. And all too often, when a woman steps forward and tells her story, she is dismissed, demeaned, or denigrated.

Each time this happens those of us who are survivors of sexual assault find old wounds reopened, trauma re-experienced. And the gut wrenching thing is that it seems that this horrid cycle will just keep on going forever. That the courage of women who speak up, say no, and claim their dignity will never be rewarded. This whole sordid story, this routine dehumanization of women, is as old as time. And as old as the Bible. Time and time again in the stories we hold as sacred, women are dismissed, demeaned, denigrated. And, to be honest, there are times I just want to throw some of them out. And yet, these are our sacred texts-and we need to meet them where they are and listen for the voice of God in and beyond them, because if you look hard enough God is always there-sometimes in the

parts of the story we ignore or avoid, or in a throw away character, but God is there.

This morning we have a story from the Book of Esther. The well known story of a beautiful young woman who became Queen and used her beauty and brains to save her people. It reads almost like a fairy tale. But like many fairy tales, it is more complicated than it seems. Esther was, like the other young women of the kingdom, drafted to appear in a lineup of young women from which the king was going to choose his new wife. The text is not interested in whether or not Esther wanted to be the King's wife, and it is really not interested in the woman who was the King's first wife. Vashti. In fact, we never hear her story in church-the only reason we did this morning is that I went rogue and put it there. The text itself, and later the church, has treated her like it treats many other women, as what Dr. Anna Carter Florence calls "a dangerous memory" and has treated her story as only useful as an introduction to the real story. So who was she?

Her story begins when King Ahasuerus, who ruled a wide swath of land from Ethiopia to India, throws the biggest party the ancient world had ever seen- inviting all the ruling class from all 127 of his provinces to the fanciest blowout ever. The kicker is that this party was not to celebrate a military

victory, or a birthday, or a wedding. It was just to celebrate....him....the King. A narcissist's dream whose only point was to impress the whole world with just how fabulous and wealthy he was. A party fueled by alcohol and testosterone, to which women were not invited. And on the *187th* day of this party, the King got talking about his wife, Vashti. About how much more beautiful, obedient, and fabulous she was than any of the other mens' wives. And to prove his point, and demonstrate his absolute power, he sent for Vashti, commanding that she come to the party wearing only her crown so that everyone can "see her beauty". Yep, you heard that right- he commands his wife to parade naked through a room full of drunk men. And everyone knows that what the king commands, the king gets and you also know that whatever happens this is not going to end well for Vashti.. Yet here is where things start to go off script. Vashti, you see, becomes the first woman in scripture to just say no. No, I will not come out and make a display of myself for your benefit. No, I will not degrade myself so that you can save face in front of your friends. No, I will not do whatever you tell me to do.

That unexpected response did not go over well. The King was embarrassed, humiliated in front of all the important men of the kingdom.

Worse, women all over the kingdom from Ethiopia to Persia heard that the Queen said no. And the men in the room, while at first just quietly laughing at the king's expense, suddenly had the awful thought that perhaps their women might not listen to them-that this one woman might set off a tidal wave of rebellion throughout the empire, with women everywhere finding the courage and realizing the power of "no". And this threat to domination, this upending of order, just could not be. They had to stop it. So the men put their heads together and came up with a plan: banish her. And erase her memory from the land.

On one level, the men are successful. Vashti disappears; the king commands a beauty pageant for all young virgins in the land who "compete" for the queen's title; and eventually one of them "wins": Esther is crowned queen, and we can get on with the real story of the book. On one level, the church concurs with the king and his sages: It has erased the memory of Vashti.

On another level, however, Vashti and her story cannot be erased. There are echoes of her great NO reverberating through the Bible. Vashti may be nothing but a backdrop for Esther for all that we hear about her, but in the story she lives on in the minds of her people, the king and, most

importantly, Queen Esther herself. Esther, who was only crowned because she kept hidden the dangerous memory of her Jewish heritage, chooses to step forward and risk her life when all the Jews in the land are threatened with death. It dawns on her that perhaps God may have sent her to the kingdom for “such a time as this”. She speaks up and saves her people. Which was a courageous and noble thing to do. And I can’t help but wonder if one of the things that influenced her was the courage of Queen Vashti. The realization that she was called on to have the same courage as the woman who said no to the King. In an age when women did not have any purpose other than being decorative and fertile, Vashti had blazed a trail. No, she said, I am more than one of your possessions. I am more than another beautiful decoration in your home. I am a human being, with integrity and self-respect, and here, I draw the line: I say no.

Esther finishes what Vashti started. Together, their story is a sacred memory of how women, or any oppressed people, can overturn a world by just saying no. It is a story of how we are so connected that one injustice can lead to another; one resistance can give rise to another. And you would think that the institution that was built to follow Jesus, the ultimate rule breaker for justice and love, would love this story. But we never even hear

it. Isn't it odd, then, that in the eyes of the church, this sacred memory has become a dangerous memory? What is so dangerous about it?

Throughout the ages perhaps this story, with its clear dynamic of a woman defying a man, was just too disruptive to the way things are "supposed" to be. You can't have women going around thinking and acting for themselves, right? And while I think that has an awful lot to do with why Vashti's story has never been told in church, it is actually much more than a story about male-female dynamics, much more than a story for women looking for inspiration to rebel.

It is the story of a human being declaring that she is a human being-fully deserving of dignity. It is a story for everyone and anyone who has had her integrity called into question. It is a story for anyone who has been pressured by those who have power over them to do something they know is wrong, something that would cost them self respect. It is a story for anyone who has been in, witnessed, an unjust situation, and said NO, I cannot go along with this, I cannot do this.

What would it be like to hold this story up, to tell it to our children? Would that give them a role model for just saying no to adults who try to harm them? Would it give our daughters a little more strength to just saying no to

a boyfriend who keeps pressuring them to have sex when they don't want to? Would it give you and me a place to begin talking about the hundreds of awkward, troubling moments in our lives when we feel we are being asked to do something that puts our integrity at risk? The boss tells us to hide money in a fake expense account or a friend at a party offers us drugs that we don't want or a family member assumes that we'll keep ignoring the addiction that's ruining his life and ours. Things can and do happen everyday that challenge our integrity. What do we do? Do we just say no? Oddly, the Bible doesn't have many role models for just saying no. Jesus did put his foot down on several occasions, but we tend to think of our Christian faith in terms of saying YES -- to God, to Christ, to a way of life. Maybe what we need to hear is that an equally important part of our life as Christians is finding the courage to say NO when we need to, even if it is a difficult, costly thing to do.

This story of Vashti, the King, and Esther does not have a clean and neat resolution. Vashti does not save the day with her no. By any of the world's measures she is a loser: The King and his cronies take away her crown, her position, her good name. When Vashti just says no, she gets herself exiled and the backlash is a pretty harsh law about wives being subservient

to their husbands. But in the eyes of God, something different is going on.

Vashti's courage inspires the next woman, and the next, and the next.

Vashti's great NO becomes Esther's great NO, so that the Jews in the empire are not systematically murdered. Vashti's example encourages women and men to speak up for themselves.

True, it does not immediately change the world. Sometimes it seems we have to take many steps backward before we begin to inch forward. But her no sets something in motion which people remembered, which Esther remembered, which the writers of the Bible remembered, and which even the king remembered. Sometimes, we have to trust that that is enough.

And I would guess that neither the king nor his men were in a rush to order their wives to parade around in just a crown ever again.

I wonder how many kings of this world are waiting for a Vashti to just say no. Perhaps you have or will encounter one of them. Perhaps it is even possible you have been sent to the kingdom for just such a time as this.

AMEN.

