

Pathfinders: The Unsung Saints Who Pave the Way

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Scripture - The scripture passage today comes from the book of Esther in the Hebrew texts. Esther is a saint, a heroine, a symbol of the deliverance of her people from the hands of their persecutors. At the beginning of her story, Esther is a beautiful young Jewish maiden living in the capital of the Persian Empire when she is chosen by King Xerxes to be one of his wives. The King becomes so captivated by Esther that he makes her his Queen. Through a lot of intrigue and jockeying for political position and power, Haman, the King's prime minister, influences the King to issue an edict authorizing the annihilation of all the Jews living in the Persian Empire.

Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who was Haman's rival in the King's court, asks Esther to intervene. Risking her own life, Esther summons the courage to reveal to the King that his edict would mean her death as well as the death of all her people. Esther asks him to revoke the edict and spare the Hebrew people. The King grants her request, and Mordecai becomes the new prime minister. To this day, the Jewish festival of Purim celebrates with joy and feasting this story of Esther and the deliverance of her people.

Now, there is also at the beginning of the Book of Esther, another story of another woman. Her name is Vashti – and she was the Queen before Esther. In the third year of King Xerxes' reign, he gave a banquet for all of his officials. Nobles and governors, army generals, financial and political advisors came to the banquet which lasted for seven days in the palace garden. The King displayed his great wealth and splendor. The courtyard was decorated with blue and white cotton curtains, tied by cords of fine purple linen to silver rings on marble columns. Couches made of gold and silver had been placed in the courtyard, which was paved with white marble, shining mother-of-pearl, and blue turquoise. Drinks were served in gold cups, no two of them alike, and the king was generous with the royal wine. There were no limits to the drinks for the King had given orders that everyone could have as much as he wanted. Meanwhile, Queen Vashti was hosting a banquet for the women in another part of the palace.

On the seventh day, the King was very merry with wine, as were all the men with him. The King then commanded that Queen Vashti be brought before him, wearing her royal crown. She was a beautiful woman, fair to behold, and the king wanted to show off her beauty to the officials and all of his guests. But, when the servants told Queen Vashti of the King's command, she refused. Queen Vashti said no. She would not come at the King's command to be displayed like an object before his drunken assemblage.

The King was furious and his anger burned within him. Now it was the King's custom to ask for advice on matters of law and order, so he consulted his sages who knew the law. They assured him that Queen Vashti had insulted not only the king and his officials – in fact, every man in the Empire. They said that every woman in the empire would start looking down on her husband as soon as she hears what the queen has done. They advised the King to issue a proclamation that Vashti could never again appear before him and that her place as queen be given to a better woman. And so it was – Vashti was banished.

Sermon – Hold onto that story of Esther and Vashti. We're talking about saints during this worship theme, and I realize that my own understanding of saints and the lists I make

of my own saints has changed a lot over my life-time. When I was in 5th and 6th grade Sunday school class at my Lutheran church, I heard lots of stories about saints. Most of the time, those stories were about pillars of the early church: Stephen, Peter and Paul, Eudicia and Perpetua. I quickly realized that all these saints were martyrs; they were killed for their religious beliefs. The summer before I was in seventh grade, my parents bought a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica, thinking it would be useful to us when my brother and I were in junior and senior high school. For those of you of the Google generation, in those days to get information one had to actually go to a thick book, open it up, and look up the topic. That Halloween, instead of getting hooked on zombies and horror movies, I developed a strange fixation about these martyred saints. I used those new encyclopedias to look up information about all the saints I could find, including martyrs like Saint Lawrence, Saint Valentine, and Saint Joan. I was in the grip of some sort of morbid fascination about the ways that all these saints died. Fortunately, that winter I developed an equally intense crush on the captain of the basketball team, whose locker happened to be across the hall from mine, and my daydreaming about him broke my martyr streak. However, it's fair to say that in those formative early adolescent years, I believed that to be a saint meant to be put to death for one's faith.

In the following chapters of my adulthood, my list of saints and my understanding of sainthood changed. On my list of saints in those years were the social justice activists Martin Luther King and William Sloane Coffin; women's rights champions such as Margaret Sanger who founded Planned Parenthood and Betty Friedan who wrote The Feminine Mystique and Margaret Mead. These saints were famous people whose public lives changed the world and changed my life. To be a saint meant to live one's life in a very public arena as a change agent and as a champion for justice and equality.

Over time, my definition of sainthood now includes more personal recognitions. I love theologian Paul Tillich's statement that "a saint is not a saint because he or she is good, but because that person is transparent for something larger than who he or she is, because that person represents something of the bigger picture of our lives." And those are the people who also are now on my list of saints, the people I remember on All-Saints Day. As Vince noted last Sunday, none of my saints are perfect, yet all of them are transparent for something of the larger picture of my life: like my father, my grandparents, a high school senior named Stuart in our youth group in Connecticut, and many many dear folks in this church community.

In the midst of this recognition of the numerous kinds of saints and the changes in my own perceptions about them, I want to lift up today the saints who are often unnoticed and unsung pathfinders, those who pave the way for others who follow.

I brought this Inuit cairn from Quebec to share with you this morning. A cairn is a pile of stones, one stone set on top of another, to mark a trail. If you have been hiking in rocky country, whether that's been in Wyoming, California, Montana or Scotland), you have often seen these cairns at clearings or at junctions in the trails. Cairns show me the path, assure me that I am going the right way, that I am not lost, and that I am not the first one who has ever been here. When I come to a cairn, I have no idea who built it, no idea how many people have added to it, and sometimes I add more rocks or straighten them up a bit as I go on my way. A cairn is a good symbol for the saints who are pathfinders. They are not necessarily the person who is the quickest or the most obvious,

not necessarily the person who gets remembered or publically acclaimed. But the pathfinder is the person who finds the way and marks it for those who follow.

That's why I chose the story of Esther today. Remember that Esther risks her position and her life in approaching the King to ask him to spare her people. Not only would she have needed permission to even speak to the King, but Xerxes had never been told that Esther was Jewish, and he certainly didn't have a good track record of respecting the concerns of his wives. But he grants Esther's request and winds up with Esther's cousin, Mordecai, as his new prime minister and Esther and the Hebrew people are saved. Why? Why did the King listen to Esther? Was it only because Esther was so beautiful?

I don't think so. I think it was because there was a pathfinder who had led the way for Esther and for Xerxes. There is one transitional sentence in the scripture that comes after the story of Queen Vashti, a sentence that then precedes the story of Esther. Listen carefully, because it is easy to miss, this one sentence as it appears in the Good News Bible: *Later, after King Xerxes's anger had cooled down, he kept thinking about what Vashti had done and about his proclamation against her.* Now I choose to believe, because of that sentence, that the King was haunted by what he had done to Vashti. And I think, because of that, when Esther comes to him with her request, Xerxes has learned something and perhaps has wished for a second chance to behave differently. And thus, Xerxes is able to respond to Esther.

Now nothing in the story suggests that Queen Vashti was unhappy being a queen, nor that she was unappreciative of the privileges that came with it, nor that she despised her husband, despite his shortcomings. In the times in which she lived, she was, no doubt well aware that it was more prudent to be careful. But something more was at stake for her than her own personal comfort, and so she refused to her husband's order to display her body to his drunken friends. In doing so, Vashti, I believe, paved the road for Esther.

Today, I celebrate the people in my life who have been pathfinders for me. I need to mention my maternal grandmother, Lillian, who during and after the depression, worked long hours daily as a salesperson in a Fannie Mae candy store. She is an example of a dedicated woman who juggled her work with her strong commitments to family as a wife, a mother, a daughter and a sister. I need to mention my high school guidance counselor, Mrs. Wilson, who opened the door to college for me, insisting to my parents that I deserved that education even if it meant leaving home as the first member of my entire extended family to go to college.

And I have to mention the long line of pathfinders who paved the way for my ordination to ministry: Antoinette Brown, the first woman minister to be ordained in this country, by the Congregational Church in 1851; the United Church of Christ in its 2005 General Synod which approved multiple paths for preparing ministers for ordination; and several women ministers from the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, whose names are unknown to me, who were ordained through this alternative path, during the time that Kent Siladi, our current Florida Conference Minister, was serving in the Connecticut Conference. All of these people were the pathfinders for me, the people who set up the cairns marking the way, so that when Kent Siladi arrived on the job in Florida and began going through the Conference Files, he found a letter from this church, that had been sitting in a file drawer for several years, requesting that Florida Conference consider the possibility of ordaining me. Kent contacted me and said, "I can't promise you what the outcome will be, but I can promise you that the Florida Conference will consider

your ordination." I stand here this morning because of these pathfinder saints in my life, because of their faithful journeys and their grace in opening the way.

Think of who those people are in your life, those people who opened the doors ahead of you, who marked the path with their cairns for you to follow with their cairns. And remember also that each of us, in ways we may never know or even dream, are pathfinders for those who follow us. One promise I can make to you this morning is that you can trust absolutely that someone sometime will move ahead along the path you have walked, because you opened some part of the trail, because you, in some way, have left a cairn to guide them on their journey. Amen.

It is our custom, as a spiritual community, on the Sunday of All Saint's week, to read the names of our church members who have died during the past year, since the previous All Saint's Day. After I read each name, Larry will toll the bell and then Ruth and Norman will offer their special music. During the music, hold in light and in prayer those UCG members who have died and their families and the saints in your own life.

St. John Chrysostom wrote, "Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before; they are now wherever we are." And so we lift up in remembrance these saints of our church, confident in their presence among us and grateful for their lives and the gifts they shared with us:

David Case

Bill Lassiter

Bil Shreve

Linda Stevens

Please join me in prayer - O Holy One, you come to us in gifts we can so easily miss: the cycles of morning and evening, the particular light that is an autumn day, children born with the eyes or uncanny mannerisms of a grandparent, our dreams of loved ones whom we thought were gone, and memories forever etched in our hearts.

We are thankful for the blessing of this moment, reminding us that those we love are with us always, as guardian angels, as a cloud of witnesses, forever part of who we are, our communion of saints.

Bring comfort to the grief of our hearts and hold those dear ones we have named, both aloud and in silence, in your care.

Guide us, we pray, to the deep wellsprings of healing in the landscapes of our souls and to the deep reservoirs of strength in the people and places of our lives, that we may be set free to love, that we may be set free to shine with your love. Amen.