

Women's Weekend with Vashti (#MeToo, #FBCIsOut)

Esther 1: 10-22

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Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

It takes courage to speak your own truth; it takes vulnerability to claim your own reality. Not that it should. If we were non-judgmental, if we were universally kind to one another, if we understood that power shared is power gained, if we were not threatened by one another's gifts and abilities, then naming and claiming who God has made us to be might not be such a big deal. Standing up for ourselves and demanding self-respect might not be such a struggle. But it is...and it seems it has been so for a very long time....

Do you remember the story of Vashti? She's a beautiful woman, married to King Ahasuerus, which made her the Queen. The text prior to what we've read this morning tells us that the King was deep into a 180-day celebration, showing off the grandeur and pomp and the extravagance of his empire. After six months of partying, the King held a seven-day banquet, the big finale; the text describes the lavish excess in everything from the palace decorations to the food and wine served. Queen Vashti held her own party for the women of the Court; it's likely they preferred the privacy of their own gathering; no need to attend to anyone or anything else than the friendships they shared with each other. Sounds like a great get away.

And it was until the King, "drunk after a great deal of wine," according to the text, called Vashti to appear before the men...wearing *nothing* but her royal crown, to show off her beauty for the enjoyment of the equally drunk government officials. And that's where the party ended....

Because Vashti refused. Because Vashti refused to be disrespected. Because Vashti refused to be objectified. Because Vashti refused to be reduced to a man's, even her husband's, plaything.

Vashti stood up for Vashti. And in doing so, she stood for all the women of the court, all the women of her age, all the women of every age who have been devalued and dishonored and denigrated for the pleasure of others. In person, in print, on line, where ever and whenever it occurs. Vashti claimed Vashti: her own personhood as created in the image of God, fashioned after the Divine likeness, proclaimed "good" and valuable and holy because she was God's own, like each and every one of us is God's own. Vashti "came out" as Vashti: beautiful, perhaps, but also wise and strong and purposeful and empowered, claiming her personhood at great risk to her very life. Were she alive today to tell this story, the other women of the Court would have likely posted "#MeToo." For the demands made of Vashti were all too familiar to all the women gathered in that place.

What does it take to claim our own lives? To declare our own truth? To live into who God calls us to be at the risk of what others expect us to be?

I think it takes courage. Vashti's refusal could have cost her her life. The King was so furious at her refusal that he gathered his advisors and governors. They assured him that this refusal would surely inspire *other* women to stand up as well, to refuse their own husbands, to refuse other men. And so, they banished Vashti and removed her as queen. And because they felt so threatened, they created a law that required women to submit to their husbands, the "proclaimed

head of the house”, so that this would never happen again. So that women wouldn’t stand up, speak out, claim their right to be God’s own. Meanwhile, the story goes on to tell of Esther becoming queen, using her intellect and experience to take great risks in order to deceive the King and to save the Hebrew people. So much for their law. #MeToo, #CourageIsContagious.

Last Sunday my niece came out. She was raised in a very conservative church who told her that anyone who identifies as anything other than male and female, anyone who engages in a relationship other than male with female, will burn in hell, is unforgivable, will die apart from all others, will live and die apart from God. She was raised hearing this; and she believed it until... she couldn’t believe it any more. Until she found the courage to claim herself, to be Vashti, to stand up to hate and objectification and to say a fuller, more authentic “yes” to herself and “yes” to God! At the risk of losing her parents and siblings, at the risk of losing her church, at the risk of losing God.

But she *didn’t lose God*... because there was another congregation, another pastor who invited her to live as God created her. It was courageous of her; it was courageous of them and it was courageous of *you* to live into the place where all are welcome! FBC has been on this path for a long time, and at times it has been difficult and costly, but it’s a journey we will continue to take together. It’s risky to say we who we are, out loud and in public, because when we do so, it’s only a matter of time before someone else will come along to try to tell us how and why we are wrong; someone else will try to limit our reach, weaken our tenacity, subvert our power to embody the fullness of the realm of God. You were courageous to vote to be welcoming; you are being courageous when you tell others, when we put rainbows on our signs and connect with

others who are courageous too. Because true courage requires vulnerability.... Vashti lost much, but in losing the crown she gained herself.

And that's what matters, doesn't it? That each one of us find and discover ourselves? Our true selves: the people God designed and called each one of us to be. Such discovery requires vulnerability: the willingness to look inside ourselves, to see ourselves as we really are. It requires that we stop playing games, pretending, fitting in, but rather that we open ourselves to love, to light, to grace and to goodness, all of God, and become all that we are yet to be. Some of you have done this and continue to do this, living vulnerably but courageously. Others of you may be somewhere on this journey. And some of you are not there yet, but you long to be and we can help you be. I am on my own journey, as some of you know. The journey of becoming all God has called me to be. My husband of 35 years and I are going our separate ways. I am in the midst of a divorce; I am choosing new life. No, I am not "coming out" in the traditional way; that is, my sexual identity isn't the issue here. But I am saying this publicly to you because it is my truth; it is my pain and yes, failure; it is my new beginning, my re-start and my chance to hear more clearly God's invitation to my life.

We each have one precious life. We dare not miss the chance to live it authentically, fully, daringly. Vashti's refusal to be used, to be objectified, to be denied dignity and self-respect gave her the power and courage to be strong and open and self-possessed and whole. Whole! A whole person loving and serving a whole God!

Vashti's example encouraged Esther. Esther's example encouraged others after her all the way down to today. What will your example do? Will you stand between someone's right and call to be all God imagines them to be or will you open yourself, your heart, your faith to welcome them on the journey, to share their struggle and to ease their load? Will we as a church shy away from our inclusive stance or will we broaden it to include people of every color, every economic situation, every language, even every belief? Authentic living takes real courage, the kind of courage that faith can give. Let's stand up for ourselves and for one another. Let's risk boldly, dare bravely. #metoo #courageiscourageous #fbcisout!