

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

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*Esther 1*

*This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present, while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all.*

*When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished in accordance with the bounty of the king. Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus.*

*On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.*

*Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king's procedure towards all who were versed in law and custom, and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom): 'According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?' Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, 'Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, "King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come." This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.'*

*This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.*

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The year was 1946 and the Ku Klux Klan, that oppressive and shadowy organization of terror, hatred, and ignorance, was as deadly as it ever was. Its influence spanned from coast to coast and brought millions into its ranks to infect this nation with fear and mistrust and violence. African Americans, homosexuals, Catholics, anyone who did not fit the image of the “ideal American,” walked the streets and lived in their very homes in fear. An alarming number of politicians, policemen, and other people in power remained silent due to fear of waking up with a burning cross in their front yard. But a man by the name of Stetson Kennedy did not remain silent.

Instead of running away from them in fear, Stetson Kennedy decided to learn more about this mysterious organization and, therefore, donned that dreaded white hood and became a Klansman. He learned their secrets. He memorized their passwords and shadowy rituals. He immersed himself in their culture in hopes to one day expose their secrets and rid them of the oppressive power that kept this nation in fear. After months of observation and research, he took the insider information he had and presented it to the police. However, they were too scared of the KKK's influence to do anything with it. It was likely that some of them were themselves Klansmen. So Stetson Kennedy had to look elsewhere.

It just so happened that another influential power was sweeping the nation in the 1940's, a hero by the name of Superman. Every week, massive numbers of children laid in front of their families' radios to hear of this week's adventure with that wonderful hero who was faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. But there was a problem: World War II was over, Superman had already defeated the Nazis, and was in need of a new villain to bring to justice. Stetson Kennedy approached the writers of the sensational radio broadcast with the perfect offer.

He divulged all of the information he had gathered from his incognito investigation. They took this gold mine of information and they wrote it into their radio script. For the next several months, Superman had a new villain to bring to justice: you guess it...the Ku Klux Klan. Each week, millions of children around the country listened with wonder and fascination as Superman defeated the Klan as the radio program exposed the secrets and rituals that Stetson Kennedy had risked his life to obtain.

Soon after, people began showing up at Klan rallies for the sole purpose of mocking them. Klan members came home from their meetings to find their children laughing at them, having just heard over the radio about Superman's victory. The membership of the Klan plummeted as the nation began to laugh at the absurdity of their rituals, their hatred, their ignorance.

Friends, there is a power to be found when absurdity is revealed for what it is.

But I don't believe that Stetson Kennedy was the first person to figure this out, for the Jews living in exile, the very community from which the Book of Esther comes to us, knew this well for they paint King Ahasuerus as very absurd.

King Ahasuerus, the text tells us, was the king of 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. One would think that he would have a lot to do with all that land and people to govern. However, apparently he believes that the best use of his time is not managing his enormous provinces but rather by throwing a party. And this is no sophisticated wine tasting. This is a drunken frat party that lasts, according to the text, 187 days. In case you're curious, 187 days before today would be December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Imagine if you were still partying and celebrating the new year on July 5<sup>th</sup>, six months later. *That* is what this party would have been like. Drinking was by the flagons, without restraint for the king gave orders for everyone to do as they desired. The Book of Esther paints this politician as absurd, over-the-top, irresponsible, fragile, and pitifully insecure. A man interested not in the upkeep of his kingdom and the people therein, but only in the arrogant display of his wealth and strength so that others might be reminded that it is not theirs.

And after 187 days of drinking and debauchery, there is only one thing left that he has not yet displayed for others to covet; his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti. Notice, I say “thing” and not “person” because King

Ahasuerus is not considering Vashti as a human being worthy of respect but as an object to be showed off. In his drunken state, he orders Vashti to parade herself before the hungry eyes of his bros while wearing the royal crown and, as the text suggests, wearing quite literally nothing *but* the royal crown.

But then something goes terribly wrong (or right, depending on who you ask): this woman of color, Queen Vashti, says no. And she doesn't say no to just anyone; she says no to the King. And she doesn't say no just anywhere; she says no to the king in front of everyone. And as we learned from Stetson Kennedy and the Klan, when someone brings to light the absurdity, things tend to fall apart. And fall apart, they did.

King Ahasuerus doesn't know exactly what to do because, well, no one has every had the courage to say no to him before. He immediately throws a tempter tantrum. He's one of those politicians that is so fragile that he just can't handle it when someone calls out his gross incompetence. He can't handle it when people pull back the curtains and realize that he's not as strong and mighty as he says he is. Now, I'm sure the 187 days of drinking was not helping his judgment so he brings in his advisors and sages to instruct him. Now, Ahasuerus is also one of those politicians that surrounds himself with people who will tell him exactly what he wants to hear. They give him a stark warning. They tell him that if he doesn't nip this in the bud, then Queen Vashti's action will inspire other women to stand up to their husbands and refuse to be submissive before them. To use the words of the text, "there will be no end to the contempt and wrath." For Vashti did not just say no to an inappropriate command. She did not simply refuse to become a sexual object for all to behold as one does a piece of meat. No, Vashti's actions bring to light the absurdity of King Ahasuerus. Her simple and daring "no" caused such a stir because the king's officials knew that, if word of this got out, if people heard this on the weekly news on the radio before the Adventures of Superman, that people might show up and begin mocking them for the absurdity that, until recently, had been so cleverly disguised.

So Vashti is banished. We never hear from her again except for an "echo" of her in chapter two which we'll talk about next Sunday. When reading the Book of Esther, most people ignore this story and dismiss it as a simple "prelude" to the rest of the story of Esther. In fact, many people don't know what to do with the book of Esther because it is an absurd book with absurd parties with an absurd king and an absurd political structure. The first part of the book of Esther tells us about a mad tyrant who will never live up to the responsibilities of his office. But Vashti saw her husband for who he was and she decided to say something about it. And that's why, when my infant daughter, Hazel Grace grows up to be a young woman, I want her to know the story of Queen Vashti. I want her to know about this woman who had far too much respect for herself and her body to let men walk all over her. I want Hazel Grace to know about Vashti's mighty act of resistance.

I want my daughter to know that there is a power to be found when absurdity is revealed for what it really is.

Today is Communion Sunday. When we gather at the Lord's Table, we proclaim the absurdity of all kinds of oppression. These days, we're particularly concerned about the absurdity of oppression that comes in the form of systemic racism. Just as Queen Vashti stood up and said "no" to an oppressive system, so too are millions of people around this country saying "no" to this nation's oppressive institutions that overtly benefit white folks over people of color. Millions of people are marching in the streets and advocating for systemic reform because there is an absurdity to be called out when a nation that is founded on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" denies those things to persons of color.

Now, friends, please do not misunderstand me: to call something absurd is *not in any way* to diminish the consequences of such absurdity. Quite the opposite. When we call an oppressive system absurd, we are labeling it as particularly dangerous. People are dying because of systemic racism. People are dying because of police brutality. People are dying because of white supremacy. And thus we label these things as absurd because we know that they are blatantly antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim each and every time we come to this Table.

We come to this Table to join the voices of those who are crying out for justice. We come to this Table to join forces with the “Vashtis” around us who have suffered the consequences of standing up to the patriarchy, those who have suffered the consequences of standing up to white supremacy and racism, those who have suffered the consequences of standing up to homophobia and any other ideology that opposes God’s justice.

We come to this Table to celebrate a strength that is very different than the so-called “strength” of King Ahasuerus. You see, he flouted his strength by a palace full of lavish ornaments and ridiculously expensive artifacts and furniture and food and drink and partying. But the king we proclaim at this Table, *his* strength is proved in nothing more (or less) than an empty tomb.

So, friends, as we come to this Table, let us follow Vashti, a woman of color who had the courage to stand up to an oppressive system. Let us follow her to this Table where we join her in saying “no” to the oppressive systems around us, among us, and, yes, even *within* us. Let us call absurdity for what it is and work alongside Vashti, Superman, and - most importantly - Jesus Christ to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**