

*Unlikely Instruments*

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; Mark 9:38-50

As you know, I like to preach out of the lectionary when we gather, so everyone knows I'm not simply mining my favorite texts, but am listening to the same Scripture that many of you are considering, as I seek with you to hear the Word of the Lord for us. Today's texts, complete with plucked eyes, amputated hands and feet, and the like, are especially challenging – but I believe I have heard a word from the Lord for us today.

This week our Lord's Day lectionary dips its toe for the one and only time into the little book of Esther. It's a curious book of Holy Scripture, in that it never mentions God. Check it out. There is no hint of prayer, no connection to Jerusalem, the Temple, or the worship life of God's people. Later editors added some sections to Esther that mention God more than 50 times, seeking to make the book more theologically grounded; those additions are included in the Apocrypha, and imaginatively named "Additions to the Book of Esther."

Yet Queen Esther is revered as one of the heroic figures of ancient Israel. Mordecai's words to her early in the story continue to resonate with us as one of the classic articulations of divine vocation: "Perhaps you have been brought to royalty for such a time as this." (Esther 4:14) Implicit in this statement is the conviction that even if she is unaware of it, God is at work in and through her to accomplish God's good purpose.

If the apparently non-religious harem-queen Esther is an unlikely instrument in God's hands, how about the guy that Jesus' disciples discover casting out demons in Jesus' name? They are indignant – what right does this outsider have to use Jesus' name if he isn't willing to join their entourage? He hasn't paid his dues. He is rogue, out of control. It's like someone presuming to be a pastor without having earned a degree from an approved seminary. The very idea!!

Paul addresses something similar in Philippians 1, acknowledging that some people who preach Christ may be off base in both their theology and their motivation. Church insiders want them silenced, but

Paul says, "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; in this I rejoice."

To be sure, there is also a story in the early church of seven brothers from outside the church community trying to cast out demons in Jesus' name, only to have the demoniac maul them badly. (Acts 19) Apparently God can be trusted to judge those who illegitimately seek to minister in Jesus' name. We don't need to execute the judgment that properly belongs to God, who alone knows the hearts of those whom we are inclined to judge. This is of course difficult for us Presbyterians to hear, as we are so mindful of assuring that everything is done decently and in order. I am all for good order, but I hear a strong caution to us order-freaks in Jesus' response to this altercation between his disciples and the one who is doing ministry out of order.

Jesus makes an amazing assumption in our text – "Those who are not against us are for us," he says. It's an assumption of generosity toward those outside our comfort zone. Alas, the story of the church

indicates that we are much more likely to assume that those who aren't inside our circle are against us.

Please hear me clearly: I am not arguing for abandoning good order and standards for ministry. I'm just trying to ask honestly how these biblical texts shape the way we engage people who don't conform to our eligibility standards for ministry. Our order and standards are not the problem, and discarding them is not the answer. But if we shun those who do not conform to our understanding of good order and sound doctrine, we may be rejecting God's chosen instruments for a particular time or place.

Inappropriate rejection takes multiple forms. Sometimes we do just as Jesus' disciples did – we try to stop someone outright who doesn't fit our order or standards. Another form of inappropriate rejection is to refuse to join or affirm those whose ministries do not conform to our norms. We may do so by barring such folk from our community, or we may do it by withdrawing from their community.

Either way we presume to make a judgment like that of Jesus' disciples, in response to which our Lord points us toward a more generous path.

I would like to propose a modest two-pronged approach to living and working together with integrity as we come alongside "unlikely instruments" in the Lord's work. The two prongs are these:

1. We unapologetically keep faith with our heritage and our promises by upholding the order that we covenanted to maintain and defend when we became members and officers in our church.
2. We wholeheartedly proclaim and defend the integrity of those who understand and practice their ministerial vocation in ways that may differ from our cherished order and convictions.

Jesus did not abandon his program with his disciples when he affirmed the ministry of someone outside their circle. He stayed the course with them even as he blessed those who were ministering in his name apart from him. At the same time as he kept faith with his disciples and the order of ministry into which he was immersing them, he affirmed the outsiders as well – if they are not against us,

he said, they are for us. The text says nothing about whether the outliers eventually joined his circle; it only says that Jesus affirmed them when they weren't part of his program.

Jesus invited his disciples to view people outside their party with the generosity that always marks the way of the Spirit. *We do not need to deny the integrity of others in order to affirm our own.*

Rather than questioning their authenticity, we give them the benefit of the doubt. We bless those whom God chooses to use as divine instruments, unlikely or ineligible as they may seem to us.

Spirit-eyes tend toward generosity rather than parsimony, to affirmation rather than denial. They demonstrate the spirit of Gamaliel, who taught that if God is with someone whose ministry is outside the bounds we have set, nothing we do can stop them; and if not, it will die without our lifting a finger against them. (Acts 5:33-39)

Consider how the Holy Spirit who inspired Holy Scripture led the writers of Scripture to give far more credit to God's flawed instruments than they patently deserve. There is Abraham, who sold

his wife due to fear of Pharaoh, laughed aloud at the strangers who announced his impending paternity, abandoned his concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael, and so on – surely the writers of the New Testament know that we have read Genesis when they lift up Abraham as a paragon of faith who never wavered (Romans 4, Hebrews 11). Or consider David, a man whose deliberated sin deserved capital punishment by any reading of the Law – not only was he spared his due punishment, but the Holy Spirit calls him a man after God’s own heart and Israel’s beloved king forever, the figure from ancient Israel with whom Jesus most fully identifies. Yes, the adulterer and murderer extraordinaire. Talk about an unlikely instrument in God’s salvation plan!

In the same way, consider the wonder of how God’s Spirit-eyes see you and me! Persistent quarrelsome sinners that we are, the Spirit calls us “saints.” Really?? (Don’t you, like me, sometimes do a double-take when our sister Ayana insists on calling us “saints”?) Repeat failures that we are, the Spirit calls us “more than

conquerors.” Paul considers himself the worst of offenders, the least likely of all to be appointed as God’s instrument, yet God uses him most mightily of all the apostles.

I have been stunned time and again at how God has used my feeble words and prayers as agents of transformation in others. More than once someone has told me that my words hit them as arrows straight from heaven, then when I ask them precisely which words, I realize that I uttered them as throwaway lines, or even worse, they heard something I didn’t even say. On the flip side, sometimes when I feel like I have an especially clear sense of a Word from God, it falls most flat. Apparently God takes delight in using me as a divine instrument when I’m least aware that God is at work through me.

So how will it be for us today in Pittsburgh Presbytery? Will we stay the course with our heritage and order, even as we open up generously to those who do not conform to the way we think they should look or act or talk? Will we extend to others the grace that



the Spirit of God has extended to us by using us as divine instruments without regard to our shortcomings? Will we continue to trust our calling even when it seems that everything we do is going nowhere?

The Lord's Table, to which we now come, reminds us that God uses the most ordinary things to accomplish the most extraordinary results – we are eating plain bread, yet in doing so we are feasting at heaven's banquet with all the saints, something we celebrate especially today with those who have left our fellowship for heaven's glory over this past year. We drink unremarkable juice, and find ourselves infused with the lifeblood of heaven's Lamb, shed for our salvation. Bread. Juice. Unlikely instruments, wouldn't you say? Just like me, just like you. Rejoice in this, beloved – we who are the least likely of all to be chosen as ambassadors of heaven are filled with the Spirit of God, fitted to purposes far beyond what we could ever imagine.

Broken vessel that I am – fill me Lord! Tattered rags in which I am adorned – make them shine as robes of Your righteousness!

Unbridled tongue that praises You and curses those made in Your image in a single breath – turn it into a fountain of blessing to all, no exceptions!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.