

“A SCHEMING WOMAN”

ESTHER 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9: 20-23

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University Church of Chicago

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Duncan Montgomery Gray, Jr., was rector of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Oxford, Mississippi on September 30, 1962 when a massive riot was instigated by the Governor of the sovereign state of Mississippi and the National Guard to keep James Meredith from registering as a student at the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss. Duncan Gray, later to become the Anglican bishop of the state, came from one of the most patrician white families in the region; he is a man of unusual commitment and longstanding roots in the South.

Nine days before the riot had been Mr. Gray’s birthday, which was also the Feast Day of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, who in our day would have been an IRS agent before encountering the Man from Nazareth. The Collect read from the *Book of Common Prayer* that day seems to have been a presage of Gray’s future:

O Almighty God, who by thy blessed Son didst call Matthew from the receipt of custom to be an Apostle and Evangelist; Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires, and inordinate love of riches, and to follow....

Duncan Gray had first become an engineer, not a tax collector. But he did become an evangelist and follower of Jesus; was never a lover of riches. He was a powerful preacher who spoke directly to his people the morning of September 30, directly from Scriptures, applying them to the crisis of the university. He had publicly said Governor Ross Barnett was a living symbol of lawlessness. To quote from Gray’s sermons is to dilute their power but necessary and indicative of his courage:

“Our governor has said that the state’s cause on this score is righteous and just...but...I ask you to consider the fact that no university in the world would defend this position rationally, and no Christian Church in the world would defend it morally...

“Surely most of us realize by now that there can be only one resolution to this crisis: the admission adjustment to the new situation all the more difficult.

“And I do not believe that any of us here today could stand in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, look Him squarely in the eye, and say, “We will not admit a Negro to the University of Mississippi.” For it was He who said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Later that evening Duncan Gray would go to the Confederate soldiers’ monument at the entrance of Ole Miss to try to keep the riot from beginning. A number of his congregation

had walked out of the service that morning and would be a long time returning, but when the little man in the clerical collar stood against the students, townspeople and National Guard that Sunday night and heard the repeated cries, “Kill the bastard!” he realized that academic training had nothing to do with prejudice and hate.

As mild and agreeable as his sermons sound fifty years later, it is still obvious that Duncan Gray broke boundaries that Sunday, boundaries of hate and evil and lawlessness. Boundaries that don't seem all that far away when we consider that we live in one of North America's most segregated cities—geographically, in housing, in education and in job opportunities. You sit this morning in one of a very few churches that is actually somewhat diverse.

Consider boundaries in our lives. Without boundaries, limits, constraints, we would not be able to live with each other. To use an obvious analogy from the world of sports, consider games like basketball, football, soccer, tennis—to name only four. When a ball goes out of bounds, a penalty of some kind is exacted: loss of down, loss of the ball, loss of serve. It would be impossible to play most sports without boundary lines.

When you ride the CTA bus or subway, you see people who try to respect other people's space and emotional boundaries. One of the most difficult adjustments many North Americans have to make in other cultures is around this very issue. People who are accustomed to living in smaller spaces and having more physical contact than we tend to get closer than we like. They tend to talk and they gesture more than we do. Boundaries are important in every culture.

Today's first lection from the Book of Esther presents us with an enigma concerning boundaries. Commentaries are quick to point out that Esther is the one book in the Bible in which God is not mentioned. Are we then to understand that the teller of the story simply assumes God's presence? Moreover, the Book of Esther is not history but a legend set back early in the Persian period intended to explain the origin and significance of the Jewish Festival of Purim. The story celebrates the escape of the Jewish community from genocide under the Persian Empire. The lectionary presents a chopped-up version of the story of Esther including its climax in chapter 7 and its concluding account of the institution of the feast of Purim in chapter 9.

Esther is a beautiful woman as an orphaned cousin of an exiled people in a far-flung province of a shaken empire when she is snatched away from her former life to be a pagan emperor's sexual plaything. A beautiful woman in a man's world, she rises in royal favor, becomes queen and saves the king's life. The part of her story that we hear today relates the turning point in her life. She maneuvers through treacherous court rules and fortuitous circumstances to eliminate a mortal threat to her own people. By the end of the story she has reclaimed her Jewish identity and saved her otherwise doomed people.

In today's portion of the book, Esther has stopped ignoring her Jewish identity in order to meet the cultural expectations of the Persian court and to become the queen. She has taken a bold stand at the urging of her uncle Mordecai, going against the rulers to appear

before her husband, the Persian King Ahasuerus. The king is a weak ruler, blind to the moral character of others and ignorant of his people, and he has come under the sway of the “wicked Haman, one of his courtiers. Because Uncle Mordecai has refused to bow to him, Haman decides to murder all the Jews and to do it legally by persuading the king of an imagined threat to him personally.

The whole thing sounds a lot like Dick Cheney manipulating the stupid George W. Bush in our own time.

When Esther hears of Haman’s plan, she decides to appeal to the king, but she does it craftily, with artifice and charm rather than with blunt attack. She chooses to make her move at a festive meal. Her brave visit to the king in the court wins his favor, so she invites him and the wicked Haman to dine with her. The king presses Esther to reveal her request and promises to give her anything she wants, even half of his kingdom (7:2). Then Esther reveals Haman’s plot to the king. “We have been sold, I and my people destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” (7:4).

But clever Esther does not leave the matter as a threat to the Jews alone. She tells the self-centered king that she would not speak if it were only about her and her people, but this plot will cause “damage to the king.” Astonished by this revelation, the king demands to know who is behind the plot. Esther answers, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman” (7:6). So, the seventy-five-foot high gallows that Haman has prepared to execute Mordecai becomes a gallows for his own execution.

When President Barack Obama was still a Senator from Illinois, he remembered being moved by a sermon preached by his pastor, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright entitled “The Audacity of Hope.” In the sermon Dr. Wright recalled a fellow pastor preaching a sermon in which he described going to an art museum and seeing a painting entitled *Hope*. The painting was of a harpist, “a woman who at first glance appears to be sitting atop a great mountain. Until you take a closer look and see that the woman is bruised and bloodied, dressed in tattered rags, the harp reduced to a single frayed string. Your eye is then drawn to the scene below, down to the valley below, where everywhere there are ravages of famine, the drumbeat of war, a world groaning under strife and deprivation...And yet...the harpist is looking upwards to the heavens. She dares to hope...She has the audacity...to make music...and to praise God...on the one string...she has left!”

The hope that stirred President Obama is the hope expressed in Esther’s story. A young woman who has been valued more for her beauty than for her brains is willing to risk her security and status and safety for the well-being of her people. She speaks words of hope and history is changed.

Andrew Delbanco has written extensively about religion in American culture; his 1988 book on the loss of evil in our nation’s self-understanding, *The Death of Satan*, was incisive as well as insightful. Another, more recent book, *The Real American Dream*, adapted from a series of lectures, examines the stories and symbols by which we try to

hold back, he writes, “the melancholy suspicion that we live in a world without meaning.” The earliest settlers in America had no such doubts. They had no notion of randomness or chance as we do today. Every event, even the smallest, had meaning and was evidence of the power and judgment of God. Calvin, in those days, didn’t refer to a designer surnamed Klein, but to a man who told us a lot about providence and God’s will, who emphasized the majesty of God and the puniness of human beings.

While working a few years ago on an essay about Alcoholics Anonymous, Mr. Delbanco attended some AA meetings around the country. “There,” he writes, “I met some desperate, and remarkably eloquent, people who found themselves in the grip of an addiction (Puritans would have called it a sin) from which they had sworn a thousand times to free themselves, but which they had never really escaped.” One Saturday morning in a New York church basement he was listening to a crisply dressed young man whose every word and gesture gave the impression of grievously wounded pride. He talked at length about how he was faultless, that his mistakes were caused by others, that he had been wounded and he was going to avenge himself upon the many people who had wronged him.

While he was speaking, the man sitting next to Delbanco—a black man of about forty, in dreadlocks and shades—leaned over and whispered, “I used to feel that way too, before I achieved low self-esteem.”

“This was more than a good line.” For Mr. Delbanco it was the moment he understood in a new way the religion he had claimed to know something about. As the speaker talked about “believing in myself,” “toughing it out,” “taking control of my life,” the black man understood the doctrine that pride is the enemy of hope. What he meant by his joke about self-esteem was that no one can save himself by dint of his own efforts. He thought the speaker was still lost—lost in himself, but without knowing it.

I am dismayed by my own failing battles with pride and conceit, and, frankly, I am dismayed and depressed by your battles also. I sit in church meetings and I watch the struggles for power and prestige that dominate so much of our time and deliberation. I see unhappy people who have no outlet for their grasp of control except through their positions in the church. Humility, one of the chief virtues of Our Lord and of those who would profess to be His followers, is forsaken time after time.

I was in a meeting the other day with a very astute trainer/consultant of one of our city’s leading charitable organizations. He’s active in his own congregation, and as we were doing some strategic planning for one of my many boards, he made a remark that ratified one of my own observations: “I do not understand how very smart, capable people who are successful in the business world can check their brains at the door when they enter the church.” Not only that, but don’t we want to give our best to God? To the One who has given us every blessing and asks only that we love God with all our heart and strength **and mind?**

To do that we must break boundaries, and let God break through the limits we have put on divine as well as human effectiveness by our pride and power-hungers and prejudices and meanness. The world is changing so rapidly, and those who would follow Jesus must not only realize that fact but break through the boundaries that have kept our religious life from affecting our economic, political and social life.

If old, improper boundaries are to be broken and the appropriate moral and spiritual boundaries of our lives are to be affirmed, we must learn to do what God tells us to do, and to ignore those demands that are made in a changing world that would keep us from doing God's work.

A story from the Eastern church illustrates the point: A monk asked, "Abbot, what has God's wisdom taught you? Did you become divine?"

"Not at all."

"Did you become a saint?"

"No, as you can clearly see."

"What then, O Abbot?"

"I became awake!"

God is trying to awaken us from the sleep of our sinful past and give us power and grace to live in the truth, to discern how to do what we are told and how not to do what we are told.