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“None of Us Is Ordinary”

Sometimes we make things more complicated than they really are. We seek a solution that’s much greater than the problem we face. We overlook what’s simple and obvious and look for something that may be more complex, meaningful, interesting, or exciting.

In today’s Call to Worship Jesus tells a story to make a point. He doesn’t offer a lengthy rational explanation or a detailed set of instructions. He tells a simple story.

In the story God tells the disciples that they’ll inherit the divine kingdom because they have served him in so many different ways.

The disciples are confused — when, where, and to whom did we do this?

And as the story reveals, we meet, see, and know God when we serve the least among us.

Such a simple, direct, clear statement about who our God is — not a theological treatise or complicated image of God.

We know that we’re frequently reminded in many other parts of the Bible to serve the disadvantaged, the least among us, but I don’t think any of those reminders identifies God AS the disadvantaged themselves as Jesus does so pointedly in this story.

Hearing his very simple statement — that God IS the disadvantaged, the least among us — obliges us to know who the least among us is.

The story of Queen Vashti that we heard this morning introduces the Old Testament Book of Esther.

The king and all of his nobles, officials, and military leaders have been celebrating an anniversary of his reign with drinking as much alcohol as they desire for seven days, at which point the king commands his Queen Vashti to be brought before them to show off her beauty.

While we may think that Vashti should be congratulated for deciding not to wade into a large party of intoxicated men, her decision causes not only the anger of her husband but a panic of such enormous need as to reinstate the superiority and control of men over their households throughout the land.

Vashti is dethroned and thereafter referred to only briefly — and then as an example of what the new queen should not be.

There is one more detail we need to tend to before we let Vashti go or bring her more intimately into our lives.

The important word in her story here is “refuse.” When we look up that word in the original ancient Hebrew text, we find it is in what that language calls the “consecutive tense.”

Hebrew is the only language that has that tense — and it means that the verb describes at the same time not only present action but recalls previous and predicts future action.

So, when someone reads the story in the original Hebrew language and comes to the line, “Vashti refused to come,” one understands it to mean “Vashti refused to come as she had in the past and would likely do in the future.” It lets us know of previous refusals and shows us that she has navigated this ground before.

Vashti is not naive and new to this game. She knows what will happen if she walks into a gathering of intoxicated powerful men, and she probably knows what will happen if she refuses to.

In our own time, about 40 years ago, a movement came out of Central and South Americas called liberation theology. Its major tenet was called the “epistemological privilege of the oppressed.”

And that simply means that the least among us have the advantage of seeing and understanding society more accurately than we do. The view from below lets one see and understand more clearly than the view from above.

Now, we may not think of Queen Vashti as oppressed, but she certainly is below and lacking the social power of the men in her class; and she is ostracized, dismissed, and rendered invisible — and she does see what they don’t see or don’t want to see.

This advantage of the disadvantaged — of the least among us — to know what we don’t know becomes even clearer in our second scripture reading, the story of Jesus and the woman who anoints his head with oil.

This story is set during the heady anxious end of days — when the sense of Jesus’ crucifixion is becoming clearer and inevitable to some.

Jesus is at dinner in the house of a prominent citizen, who is named and described as Simon the leper.

A woman — a nobody — somehow gets in and pours a refreshing ointment on the sun-dried head of Jesus.

The disciples — perhaps as you or I would do — rebuke her for wasting what could more appropriately be sold and used to help the poor.

Jesus scolds them — don't be so full of yourselves to think you can solve the problems of the poor, he says.

He then tells them what they have missed and what only she could know — that he will be killed, what he will need after he is killed, and what will happen in Jerusalem because of his death.

Jesus pushes this recognition of her special knowledge even further by saying that in the future when the story of what has happened to him and to Jerusalem, is told anywhere in the world it shall be told in remembrance of her — a nameless woman.

Is it an editorial insult or oversight that she isn't named. I think it's intentional with purpose. Why so obviously identify Simon the leper and do nothing to identify her?

The writer of this story leaves her nameless, I think, because we have to find, identify, and name her in our own lives. The nameless woman cannot be named specifically in the story because she represents all of those who are least-among-us and yet to be served by us throughout time.

In Ivoryton, my home village, after the ivory industry was in decline, the large building that had served as a boarding house for male workers was sold and became a combination of restaurant, night club, bar, and hotel with varying degrees of success throughout the years. It was and still is called the Ivoryton Inn.

Some of the stars who stayed or performed at the Inn were Rudy Vallee, the Inkspots, Mae West, Marlon Brando, and Christine Jorgensen, the first person to become widely known in the United States for having sex reassignment surgery.

When Christine came to perform, I was a boy of nine, who liked being a boy, but wanted to be a boy who didn't quite meet the expectations of what a boy should like to do.

My favorite activities were playing in the woods and helping my dad repair and renovate the old house we lived in. Things a boy should do.

But I also taught myself how to twirl a baton and practiced for hours in our backyard with the dream of becoming a high-stepping majorette someday.

The other day at dinner, my friends and I started talking about “our” sport was when we were young. I spoke about horseback riding and hanging out whenever I could at the local horse farm with a bunch of other kids.

One of my friends asked how many other boys were in the bunch of kids. And I said “none.”

Girls were my best friends and playmates.

I hadn’t heard about Christine Jorgensen before she arrived, and as I overheard the adults in my extended family talking about her, I was both interested and scared.

I found a book about Christine in our local library that I managed to sneak out.

The Ivoryton Library is about about one-quarter the size of this room, and one of my cousins was the librarian, so I’m sure that before I even got home with the book anyone in my family who needed to know knew what I had done.

But no one said anything about it to me.

When I tried to read the book, I found that it was way above my reading level, but it had photographs with captions, and I got a fuller picture of who Christine was.

The Ivoryton Inn was midway between our house and the corner grocery, and I found myself finding excuses to go to the store and to pass the Inn.

Finally, I did see an attractive well-dressed woman coming out of the Inn who looked like the photos in the book.

When our paths were about to cross, she looked at me and said, “Well, hello, young man, how are you?”

As I looked at her, I couldn’t help myself from saying, “You look very ordinary.”

She smiled and said, “None of us is ordinary, sweetheart,” then she paused and said with affection, “Including you, my dear.”

When I told my parents at dinner that night what had happened, my dad said, “Well, I guess that settles it, doesn’t it?”

I thought oh, I’m going to be sent away to have surgery, so I said somewhat haltingly, “What do you mean?”

And my dad said, “Well, don’t try to be ordinary.”

In the years that followed, I don’t think I disappointed him.

In looking back over these stories, we can see that Vashti teaches us the importance of not going along with what we don't want to do, the risks as well as the need to do what we decide we should do.

The unnamed woman with the flask of expensive ointment shows us that others have a viewpoint that sees what we don't see but can learn from, and she shows us that sometimes we need courage and affirmation to do beautiful things for other people.

Christine reminds us that we each have something that is different, unique, perhaps divine, that can be shared and can help others.

Just as we may need to work at finding and welcoming those who are least among us, we may also need to bring out and share those of our own qualities that we tend to hide and don't lift up and share — those thoughts and feelings we consider or assign to be the least important within us but yet tell us more honestly what we know and need to know.

I think continuing to build community, a progressive open and welcoming church, is making, wherever we are, into a place in which those qualities can be safely shared and appreciated by the least and the most among us.