



What binds us together? Something deeper than our individual political positions brings us together each Sunday in this place and at this time. I like to think it is our shared faith in God, in God’s ever present and redeeming love that causes us to get up on a Sunday morning and gather as the community of St. John’s. I like to think it is our shared belief that we are called to respect the dignity of every human being- indeed of all creation- that enables us to sit side-by-side even when we vehemently disagree about how we ought to move forward in the world. We can respect each other as people of God even as we will vote differently come November. I also like to think that we get up and come to St. John’s, on Sundays as well as other times, because here we are a community that supports one another in times of grief, in times of loss, in times of uncertainty. We are, in the words of our Eucharistic Prayer coming here – coming to the table – not for strength only but also for solace. Coming here, as the people of God, to discern where and how we will go forward in a world that too often breaks our heart.

Being part of St. John’s also offers us opportunities to volunteer with our community. Susan Dreyfuss, in an article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*¹ writes:

When we recognize the humanity in each other, we lay the foundations of understanding, empathy, and compassion. These then form the blocks of a healthy civil society in which citizens are more likely to focus on what unites us than what divides us.

The story of Esther is one of strife and hatred of one for another. Of one race or ethnic group for another. It is a story of a king abusing his power. And, it is a story of two women, Vashti and Esther, who stood up to that king and said “no”, you will not make me an object rather than a person. No, you will not destroy a whole people simply because the people are different- the people are not native born.

¹ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/volunteerism_and_us_civil_society#bio-footer (September 1, 2018)

Purim is a Jewish festival that has its origin in the book of Esther. It celebrates the saving of the Jewish people from extermination. In this case, an official of the king, Haman, was bound and determined to destroy the people he saw as causing him shame. As Adele Berlin says:² “Haman is an erratic egomaniac, with wild mood swings, concerned only for his own honor and his enemy’s disgrace.” Haman decides to destroy all the Jews living in Persia because the Jews held fast to their beliefs of one God and would not bow to secular authorities. Dr. Berlin also suggests that Esther is best read as a comedy. A comedy, yes, but one with deep and important messages for us in 2018.

At his funeral, several people told what drew them to John McCain even as they sometimes deeply disagreed with him. McCain’s motto was “live for something greater than yourself.” Esther’s story was captured in our Scripture because “heroes are role models for all of us. Their courage, devotion and commitment to their values are examples and inspiration for all of us to use our own life’s circumstances to achieve greatness.”³ Esther lived for something greater than herself; in her case, the safety and wellbeing of the people of Israel who had been captured and sent to live in Persia.

Esther is comedy and not history, which gives it a unique place in our Scripture. It also reminds us that learning and understanding God’s word does not need to be serious or solemn. We can learn about how we are to live in all places and circumstances. Look beneath the surface for the truth of God’s love for us and for one another.

We finish today our readings from the Letter of James. At first glance perhaps not much in common with Esther. And yet, consider how what Esther was after was to preserve the Jewish people living in a foreign land. To preserve their faith and culture in a land where court officials derided them for their religious practices and beliefs. When you consider our text from James from this perspective, then the two readings are not so diverse.

James’ admonitions are directed at keeping the community of the faithful together and strong. To take care of one another in sickness, in suffering, in confession of sin, and in wandering from the faith.

We hear echoes of Jesus in Matthew 5: the Beatitudes. When Jesus commands us to care for one another. James, like Paul, urges us to pray. James says pray in good times of celebration and in hard times of suffering and sickness. Prayer keeps us grounded to our faith and to each other. James also reminds us to call upon the church – we are not in this life alone. We are a community of faith that is to come to the aid of our brothers and sisters. We are also called to seek out the lost, those who have strayed from the faith. Not something we Episcopalians often do easily. This is a reminder, though, that our God is one of redemption and grace. Each week as we say our corporate confession and absolution is promised, we are reminded that we are each fallible human beings – but our God is eternal and our God always offers forgiveness to all who seek God.

² [The Jewish Study Bible](#), p. 1624

³ https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/1310/oq/Esther/jewish/Esther.htm (September 1, 2018)

This passage in James has sometimes been used to support the notion that if we pray for someone and he or she is not healed that we didn't pray hard enough. I reject that reading and I hope you will, too. Healing is not always the same as being cured. Cured is being relieved of whatever medical or emotional or physical illness besets you. Although we use the words interchangeably, healing is different than curing. Healing is being restored to right relationship with God. You may or may not be cured of your illness, human knowledge and the state of medical treatment being what it is. You will always be healed if you will turn your head and your heart towards God.

To live with your heart and your head turned towards God means that you will offer a cup of water to the thirsty. It means we accept all those who worship God even when they do not worship exactly as we do. Jesus captures this reminder when he says: "Whoever is not against us is for us." That's often hard for us to hear – we like our rules and our ways of doing things. But our ways are not always God's ways. And God's ways are more numerous than the sands. Open your hearts and minds and learn how others see and worship the same God as we do. It is not our role – it was not Haman's role – to define one way of being.

In a reflection on a passage from the Book of Job, and applicable to our readings today, Carol Mead wrote⁴:

In a TV show, an assistant often questions his boss's plans by asking the ultimate objective. When the boss suggests an action he will take, the assistant will ask, "To what end?"

Wouldn't that question serve us all well? Wouldn't we be more loving, compassionate human beings if we silently asked, before words or actions, what we hoped to accomplish? I know I would've saved myself untold anxiety and regret if I had filtered my plans by asking "To what end?"

Job saw only futility in trying to be "just before God," possibly because he felt God had punished him *unjustly*. But Jesus taught us that the *end*, or final objective, of human existence is to be loving like God. That choice also serves us well in the moment. We do not imitate God to fill our scorecard, but to live a life which brings peace and fulfillment. We minimize anxiety by avoiding regret instead of creating it. We learn that being at peace with others rather than in confrontation with them allows us to love them even when they hurt us.

If we don't see others being careful in their words and actions, we feel validated in our own carelessness. But going along with the crowd in terms of enmity and separation brings nothing but disquiet. We are to be loving and righteous human beings. "To what end?" we may ask.

To the very end: to be with God. **Amen.**

⁴ <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm#inbox/FMfcgxvzKQkSPLBwkQLKLpHVVdPZSsGh> (Sept. 1, 2018)

19 Pentecost – Proper 21

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5: 13-20; Mark 9: 38-50

September 30, 2018