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“The Woman Who Said ‘No!’”

There are so many good things going on in the Old Testament book of Esther, so it’s a shame that we only get to hear from it once — just *once* — in the three-year cycle of Sunday Bible readings. And that’s mainly why I wanted to focus on it. Sort of.

In short, it’s the story of a Jewish woman — Esther, naturally — living in ancient Persia, who becomes the queen of Persia. And the book describes how Esther learns about plans to exterminate all of the Jewish people who are living in Persia, and the steps she takes to thwart those plans. So, naturally, Esther is the hero of this brief tale of palace intrigue.

But I think there’s another hero, who shows up in the book of Esther — an unsung hero, really — who appears only briefly in the first chapter. However, I think she plays a pivotal role in setting the stage for what happens in the following chapters. And so, I want to talk about this person for the next few minutes.

Her name is Queen Vashti. Don't worry if you've never heard the name; practically no one has. And I think that's because her story falls into the category of what some have called a "dangerous memory." That is, it's something that actually happened, but it was too damaging a story, or too racy a story, or just too embarrassing a story, to remember. And so, that's why people simply choose to forget all about her.

I can easily imagine that all families have a story about someone, or something that happened, and it was a story that was later determined to be a dangerous memory. And that's not always a bad thing. Sometimes, there are good reasons for the kids not to hear every detail of their family's past. Some stories really are best left untold.

But some of those stories — some of those dangerous memories — can stop being quite so dangerous, if we can manage to get them out into the open, and learn from them. In other words, sometimes we can change a dangerous memory into a cautionary tale; and thereby transform it into something that can make a family stronger.

The Church, like any other family, has its own collection of stories. Some of them are sacred, and were preserved for posterity. However, some of those stories were judged by someone to be a dangerous memory, and taken out of circulation. And if I had to guess, that's probably why we haven't heard much about Queen Vashti; that's why she's been left out of our three-year cycle of Sunday Bible readings.

Now, if you're like me, you're probably wondering: "What was so dangerous about the story of Queen Vashti?" And that's a good question, because the author of the book of Esther thought that she was important enough to mention her *by name* in his text. So, what's the deal? Let's find out.

As I mentioned before, Queen Vashti makes her only appearance in the first chapter of the book of Esther, and this is how her story unfolds.

One day, King Ahasuerus of Persia — Vashti's husband — decides to throw this huge party, with the purpose of impressing all of his governmental officials. Now, when I say huge, we're talking a literal six months of eating and drinking to excess. It was

pure bacchanalia! Anyway, on the very last day of this huge bash, the king decides to bring out the one thing he hasn't yet put on display: his wife, Queen Vashti.

Now, keep in mind that, in those days, no one was allowed to look at the king's wives. But Ahasuerus was a king who liked to flout convention — especially if it would impress people — so he orders his servants

“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” (Esther 1:11).

Now, all that sounds innocuous enough. But some of the ancient rabbinical commentaries speculated that the king was ordering Queen Vashti to come out ... wearing *only* her crown. In other words, the king wants all of his guests — men who have spent the last six months eating and drinking from the king's table — to take a good, long look at the king's wife; to see her as only the king can see her, and to be reminded that this is one thing they cannot have.

Now, so far, this story has only been offensive — though on so many levels — but now it starts to get dangerous: because Queen Vashti does *not* do as the king has ordered. And in her refusal, Queen Vashti was saying, in effect:

“No! I will not put myself on display for your benefit. No! I will not degrade myself, so that you can look good in front of your friends.
No! I will not do whatever you tell me to do.
And I *especially* won’t do it when you’ve been drunk for the last six months!”

Naturally, the king is enraged, because his wife has publicly humiliated him. And so, the king and his counselors put their heads together to discuss what to do with his rebellious wife. Their decision is to depose her; to send her off into exile; and simply try to forget all about her. And on one level, the king and his counselors are successful, because Vashti disappears entirely from the biblical record.

And what quickly follows next, in the book of Esther, is a virtual cattle call for young virgins to come and compete, and see

who will take Vashti's place. Eventually, it is Esther who get's the nod — and not only because she was beautiful, but also because she successfully hid the fact of her Jewish heritage — and Esther is given the crown.

However, it soon becomes clear, that the *memory* of what Vashti did, cannot be easily erased. For, shortly after being named the queen, Esther learns that the king has been unknowingly tricked into supporting a plot to slaughter all of the Jews in the realm. And it's at this point that Esther begins to realize that she, too, has to stand up to the king, in order to expose the plot, and save her people.

But here's the thing: I wonder if Esther would have had the courage to do what needed to be done, if she hadn't had the example of Vashti, her predecessor, the woman who just said No!

I mean, think about it: At a time when women had no purpose, except to be decorative and fertile, Queen Vashti blazed a new trail by standing up to the king and saying,

“No! I am more than a cheap thrill. I am more than a decorative plaything. I am a human being, with integrity and self-respect. And here, I draw the line: Here, I say *No!*”

In a very real way, Esther finishes what Vashti started. And, together, their story is a sacred memory of how women — or any oppressed people — can overturn a world by just saying No!

But it’s also a story about how we are so connected, that one injustice can easily lead to another; but also how one act of resistance can easily give rise to another. And so, isn’t it odd, then, that in the eyes of the Church, this wonderful story seems to have been deemed a dangerous memory? Why is that?

Well, maybe the Church thought that Vashti was challenging the *status quo* in a dangerous way. I mean, she does after all say No! to the king. What if everyone said No! to the king? *Or to the Church?* What if every woman somehow found the courage to say No! to a man? Well, maybe the Church didn’t want to risk a world in which subjects could say No! to their leaders, or — God help us! — where women could say No! to men.

And if that's the case, then the Church missed the point of this story altogether. Because, after all, King Ahasuerus wasn't just asking Queen Vashti to fetch his slippers. Rather, he was demanding that she do something unthinkable and humiliating. Are we supposed to obey commands that compromise our integrity? Is this what we teach our children?

I think it's likely that the Church was so distracted by the male-female dynamics in the story, that it forgot to look beyond what appeared to be merely a feud between a king and his queen; and that's too bad, because there's more to this story than that. And it's not merely a feminist message; and it's not a story for women who're looking for a reason to rebel. This is a story for every person who has felt his or her integrity called into question; or who has had to stand up to an unjust situation and say, "No! I cannot go along with this."

Now, what do you suppose would happen, if we put the story of Queen Vashti back into circulation? If we included it as part of our cycle Sunday of readings? What would happen if that dangerous memory were allowed to become a sacred story?

I think it would give our children a role model for how to say No! to adults who try to harm them. I think it would show our daughters that it's okay to say No! to boyfriends who pressure them to do things they don't want to do. And I think it would give all of us a place to begin talking about all of those awkward and troubling moments in our lives, when we feel like we are being asked to do something that puts our integrity at risk. And that's important, because things like that happen every day.

In the end, I'm okay with the fact that Vashti's story doesn't end the way we might like for it to end. Vashti does not save the day with her great refusal. In fact, in the eyes of the world, she loses: She loses her crown, her prestige, and her good name. But in the eyes of God, I think something else is going on, because Vashti's courage inspired the next woman, and quite possibly the next, and the next. Vashti's No! becomes Esther's No!, and all the Jews in that ancient Persian empire were saved.

In other words, Vashti's example encourages people to speak up for themselves. True, it may not change the world, but it sets in motion something which people remembered. It was something which Esther remembered. And it was something which the

author of the book of Esther remembered. And, sometimes, we have to trust that that's enough.

May God grant to each of us, when and if the time arises, the strength and courage to just say No! That we might be like Vashti and Esther. And that our lives might be an example, and a source of encouragement, to others.

Amen.