

The Woman Who Just Said 'No'

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Esther 1:1-2:4

I would be willing to bet good money that most of the people in our congregations, and maybe some of you, have never heard of Vashti. If that is the case, don't feel that you have flunked the latest biblical literacy test. *No one* knows about Vashti. And the reason, I think, is that her story is what I would call a *dangerous memory*.

"Dangerous memories" are exactly what they sound like: things that really happened, but that are too damaging, or too racy, or just too embarrassing to remember. Every year the press has a field day digging up dangerous memories of the folks in Washington, and so we get to hear about who smoked marijuana in the sixties, who cheated on their tax returns, who had grandparents who kept their Jewish heritage a secret.

I would be willing to bet good money that in your family, as in mine, there are plenty of stories, some of which have been classified as *dangerous* — which means that certain relatives would rather not think about them, let alone pass them down to the children. Sometimes, there are good reasons for keeping things quiet. Maybe it's better if the kids *don't* know how Aunt Tess kept her family together, or how great grandpa made his money, or how Uncle John survived the war. Maybe so. But sometimes, dangerous memories stop being dangerous when we get them out in the open and learn from them. Sometimes, they can make a family stronger.

The church is a family, just like any other. It has stories, sacred stories, many of them collected in our Bible. And just like any other family, sometimes the church considers its sacred stories to be *dangerous memories*, and it takes them out of circulation, so to speak. That's why you haven't heard much about Vashti. The church has traditionally seen her story as a dangerous memory, and so she isn't in the lectionary of assigned readings.

For someone like me, that's just an invitation to turn on the search lights. What's so dangerous about Queen Vashti? After all, the writer of the book of Esther thought she was important enough to remember; she *is* in the Bible. So why haven't *we* heard more about her?

Vashti makes her one and only appearance at the beginning of the book of Esther. (I am willing to bet good money, by the way, that most of us *have* heard of Queen Esther.) Right away, we have a clue as to why this is not generally considered to be great Sunday School material: what we are reading about is probably the biggest party ever given in the ancient world. And when I say "party," I don't mean a lovely little fiesta or soiree; I mean a great, big drunken brawl, personally hosted by the king himself. We're talking "Animal House"; we're talking "Tailhook"; we're talking about one hundred and eighty-seven days of straight debauchery.

Here's the story. King Ahasuerus, who ruled lands from Ethiopia to India, decided one day to throw a party for all the officials and governors and soldiers and princes who worked for him in over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. The purpose of this party was not to *thank* his employees, however. It was to *impress* them. The king

wanted to dazzle everyone with the splendor and pomp of his royal palace, and he figured he needed about six months to do it right. So that's what he did: the king invited his workers to leave their posts for about half a year and come party in the capital of Babylon. There was no agenda except to gorge and drink and be impressed, which they did and were. And after six months of *that*, the king decided this wasn't enough; more people needed to be impressed, and he brought in fresh recruits. The entire capital was invited to come for a final seven days of royal display, and, as the text says, the whole town drank by the flagons, without restraint, for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

Heaven only knows how the rest of the kingdom was coping, with the army and government on a six month vacation and no one in charge back home and all the tax dollars going into the entertainment budget. But this is a king whose priority is not to do the *right* thing, but to do the *fun* thing. So it comes as no surprise that on the one hundred and eighty-seventh day of this royal bash, the king decides that he has not yet displayed everything he owns; he has not yet shown the hordes his *wife*. *That* would be a fun thing! Bear in mind that in those days, men and women lived separately. No one—and I mean *no one*—was allowed to look at the king's wives (and yes, there were many of them) except the king and his eunuchs, who were, as you can imagine, no threat at all. But this is a king who likes to flaunt convention, if it will impress his underlings. He orders his servants to bring him the ravishing Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, so that everyone can “see her beauty” — which means, basically, that he wants Vashti to come out wearing *only* her crown; nothing else. The king wants all these men who have spent six months eating the king's food and drinking the king's wine to take a good, long look at the king's wife, as only the king can see her, and to remember that *this* is one thing they can't have.

Here comes the dangerous part of the story. Even though the atmosphere is as charged with testosterone as any you will ever find, Queen Vashti does not do as any obedient subject of the king ought to do, when given a direct order. She does not shuck her clothes, swallow her pride, and pretend that she is Demi Moore trapped in a strip tease joint for the good of her family. Queen Vashti is probably the first woman on record to *just say no*. No, I will not come out and make a display of myself for your benefit. No, I will not lose my integrity so that you can save face in front of your friends. No, I will not do whatever you tell me to do. And I most emphatically will not do it when you have been drunk for one hundred and eighty-seven days.

The king's reaction is predictable. He is enraged and humiliated. Not only that, he is enraged and humiliated in front of all the men of the kingdom. The story spreads. Women in Persia and Media hear of it; women in Ethiopia and India learn of how Queen Vashti *just said no* to the king. They decide to give it a try. Soon, men who may have been snickering at the king in the throne room are no longer snickering. They find that Queen Vashti's example has let loose a tidal wave of rebellion among the women of the empire. Noble ladies everywhere are discovering great potential in *just saying no*. The order of the entire kingdom is disrupted. What to do?

The king, the officials, and the sages put their heads together. They ask: according to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of the King? They decide: let her rot. Away with Vashti, and away with any woman who fails to do as her husband commands. Let another queen be chosen to take Vashti's place, and please, God, may her memory die with her.

On one level, the men are successful. Vashti disappears, there is a cattle call for young virgins to come and compete for the queen's title, and eventually, one of them is able to distract the king from the memory of his exiled wife: Esther is crowned queen, and as far as the church is concerned, we can get onto the real story of the book. On one level, the church concurs with the king and all his sages: it has let the memory of Vashti rot.

On another level, however, the story of Vashti cannot be erased. There are echoes of her great *No* reverberating all through the Bible. Vashti may be nothing but a prologue to the book of Esther in the church's eyes, for all that we hear about her, but in the Bible she lives on in the minds of her people, the king, and most importantly, Queen Esther herself.

We have to remember that Esther, who is crowned only because she hides the dangerous memory of her Jewish heritage, chooses to risk her life when she discovers a plot to slaughter all Jews in the realm. She realizes that God may have sent her to the kingdom "for such a time as this," and she decides to speak up on behalf of her people. When we read the book of Esther at all, we usually read that part of the story. But I wonder whether Esther would have ever found the courage to do as she did if she did not have the example of Vashti, her predecessor, the woman who *just said no*. In an age when women did not have a purpose, *any* purpose, other than that of being decorative and fertile, Vashti cut new ground. No, she said, I am more than a cheap thrill. I am more than a decorative display. I am a human being with self respect, and here, I draw the line: *I say no*.

Esther finishes what Vashti started. Together, their story is a sacred memory of how women, or any oppressed people, can overturn a world by *just saying no*. It is a story of how we are so connected that one injustice can lead to another; one resistance can give rise to another. Isn't it odd that in the eyes of the church, this sacred memory has become a dangerous memory? Why have we not heard this story? What is so dangerous about it?

Maybe the church has thought that Vashti challenges the order of the day in a dangerous way. She does, after all, say *NO* to the king. What if everyone said no to the king? What if every woman said no to a man? Maybe the church has not wanted us to consider a world in which subjects *just say no* to their leaders, and women *just say no* to men.

And maybe the church has missed the point. After all, the king in this story hardly asks his wife to fetch his slippers; he demands that she do something unthinkable and humiliating, something which totally violates the marriage contract. Are we supposed to obey things that compromise our integrity? Is this what we teach our daughters, our sons?

I think that the church has traditionally been so upset by the male-female dynamics in this story that it has forgotten to look further than the royal feud between king and queen. This story is about more than that. It is not merely a feminist message. It is not a story for women looking for a reason to rebel. This is a story for every person who has ever felt her integrity called into question, who has ever had to weigh the risks between his job and his self-respect, who has ever had to stand up in the face of an unjust situation and say, *NO*, I cannot go along with this.

I wonder what would happen if we put the story of Vashti back into circulation. Would our children have a role model for *just saying no* to adults who try to molest or

harm them? Would our daughters muster a little more courage for *just saying no* to a boyfriend who keeps pressuring them to have sex when they don't want to? Would it give you and me a place to begin talking about the hundreds of awkward, troubling moments in our lives when we feel like we are being asked to do something that puts our integrity at risk? The boss tells us to hide money in a fake expense account; a friend at a party offers us drugs that we don't want; a family member assumes that we'll keep ignoring the addiction that's ruining his life and ours. Things can and do happen every day that challenge our integrity. What do we say? Do we *just say no*? It isn't easy. It's a funny thing: we don't have many role models for *just saying no*, especially from the Bible. It's true that Jesus put his foot down on several occasions, but we tend to think of our Christian faith in terms of saying *Yes* — to God, to Christ, to love, to the law. But an equally important part of our life as Christians is finding the courage and the encouragement to say *No* when we need to, not because it's the easy thing to do, but because it's the right thing to do.

I like the fact that this isn't a clean story. Vashti does not save the day with her great *No*. In fact, in the eyes of the world, she loses: they take away her crown, her position, her prestige, her good name. In the eyes of the world, when Vashti *just says no*, she gets herself exiled and she inspires a pretty harsh law about wives being subservient to their husbands. But in the eyes of God, it is something different. Vashti's courage inspires the next woman, and the next, and the next. Vashti's great *No* becomes Esther's great *No*, so that the Jews in empire are not systematically murdered. Vashti's example encourages women and men to speak up for themselves. True, it does not change the world. But it sets something in motion which people remembered, which Esther remembered, which the writers of the Bible remembered, which even the king remembered. Sometimes, we have to trust that that is enough. And I would bet good money that from then on, the king and his men thought twice about ordering their wives to parade around in front of anybody.

I wonder how many kings of this world are waiting for a Vashti to *just say no*. Maybe you will meet one of them. And maybe you have been sent to the kingdom for just such a time as that.