

"Consequences"

Esther 7:1-6, 8:1-8, 11

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Noah Webster' is one of the most enduring names in American History. The reason? Well as more than one person has said, "the man who defines words defines culture." That's a truism, taught to us both by classical philosophy and modern sociology. But it's that same truth that's made *Webster's Dictionary* a best-seller for nearly two centuries now.

The first edition was published back in 1828. It was created when words and culture in America still rested on the two pillars of patriotism and biblical faith. Noah Webster, for instance, was a direct descendant of William Bradford, the pilgrim Governor of Plymouth Plantation. And he was able to read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew as well as English. In the preface to his first dictionary he wrote that the Bible was the foundation for all true education, that without the Bible all education was "useless." That was the word he used, "useless." And Noah Webster didn't use words lightly.

But he died in 1843. And in the years since it's interesting to see how both the definitions of words in *Webster's Dictionary* and culture in America has changed. This morning, for example, I want to talk to you about "consequences." It's the word I want you to think about with me as we think about the last part of Esther's legacy. And I thought you might be interested to learn how the definition of that word is different in the dictionary today than it was in Webster's original.

You see in the dictionary today the first definition for the word "consequence" is "a conclusion produced through logic." But in the original *Webster's Dictionary* it was defined as "that which follows from an act or a series of actions." And while you might not notice it at first, there's a difference between those definitions. The modern definition views a "consequence" as a product of human thought. But the original definition leaves room for others to act upon our thoughts.

And I wonder if that was intentional, if Webster was expressing his belief that God is often one of the actors, at work in the background, helping us reach what we call consequences or conclusions. Because the idea that does that, that He works in the background of our lives and our decisions is a major lesson the book of Esther wants to teach us. But before we talk about that lesson this morning, I hope you'll give me just a few minutes to go over with you some of the other lessons we've already learned from Esther's life and legacy.

We began our study of the book of Esther four weeks ago, with a single word. Remember? The word was "Crisis." And we used that word because that's where the book begins, with a crisis. And it turns out the crisis in Esther's life is not unlike the crisis that many of us who are Presbyterians feel like we're facing today.

In Esther's case, the crisis was caused by a new law. The law changed things. It directed people to honor a man named Haman. But Esther's adopted father, a man named Mordecai wouldn't do it because he was convinced that to Haman would dishonor God. And Mordecai was a man who stood on his convictions, literally. So while everyone else kneeled whenever Haman rode or walked by them, Mordecai stood. He stood on his convictions.

In our case, a new law just been passed too, by a majority vote of Presbyteries across the country. The law changes things. It permits the ordination of people who say they have no reason to repent of sexual behavior God warns us to avoid. And the law asks Presbyterians to honor the ordination of such people.

However, as I said three weeks ago, the issue's not really about ordination. It's not really about one kind of sin either. For the truth is all of us are people whose lives are stained by sin, and that includes all of us who are ordained. And all our sins are the same in the sight of God. No the issue's not really about ordination, and it's not about one kind of sin. The issue's really about what we decide we'll do when we sin.

Will we keep on acknowledging that God's moral rule in our lives? Or go our own way? Will we let God define right and wrong? Or make our own definitions? When we find ourselves on the wrong side of sin, will we confess it? Will we agree with God about the fact that we've sinned? Or will we try to justify ourselves by calling right what God calls wrong?

Those are the questions we ended up asking when we took a first look at the book of Esther three weeks ago and talked about the word "Crisis." But then we took a second look and talked about the word "Call."

For in the book of Esther, Mordecai sends a message to his adopted daughter. Remember? He asks her to stand up with him and defend her God and her people. For Haman, in his frustration at Mordecai's refusal to honor him has plotted to destroy Mordecai and the Jews. And when she first hears of it, Esther isn't sure how to respond. She's hesitant to get involved. So she tells Mordecai she's not sure she can do anything. She's not even sure the King will allow her an audience to speak to him. She's worried about what will happen if she tries to see him without being summoned.

But Mordecai firmly but gently speaks the truth to her. He reminds her of reality. Choosing to do nothing won't work. It will only avoid the problem. It won't solve it. So instead of doing nothing, Mordecai asks Esther to do two things. First he asks her to remember her history. For he knows what that history will show her. He knows that the history of the Old Testament will show Esther how God delivers his people from distress over and over again. So he asks her to remember that.

And then Mordecai does a second thing. He makes a request. He asks her to listen for God at work in her life. He asks her to listen for God's call. "Who knows", he says, "perhaps you're been put in your royal position for such a time as this?"

And that same thought is one you and I should probably consider too, isn't it? For though our situation's not exactly the same. After all we're not living in Old Testament times. We're living in the 21st century. And we're not Jews, we're Presbyterians. But the truth folks, the truth is this. In any difficult situation, the questions for God's people are always the same.

Will we accept the reality of our crisis? Or will we try to avoid it? Will we remember our history, what God has done for Presbyterians in the past? Or will we ignore it? Will we listen for God's call to us and consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, God has put us as Presbyterians into the position we're in for such a time as this?

Those are the questions we asked at the end of our second look into the book of Esther. And they're questions that deserve an answer from each of us. But how

should we go about answering them? Last week, in our third look at the book of Esther we found out. For last week in our third look at the book of Esther we focused on the turning point in Esther's life and legacy. And we discovered that the turning point happened when Esther made a commitment to prayer and called people around her to do the same.

"Gather all the Jews," Esther told Mordecai "and fast and pray for me for three days. I and my attendants will fast and pray too." And out of that commitment to prayer, as we saw, the outline of a plan emerged in Esther's mind. But it was a plan that demanded patience. Instead of seeking an immediate solution God told Esther to invite the King to a banquet. And then when the banquet was finished, God told Esther to invite him back the next day.

A commitment to prayer, to a plan, to patience. Those were the lessons we learned from the book of Esther last week. And I encouraged all of you to take those lessons and apply them to your lives. Remember? I encouraged you to pray with me for God to lead each of us individually and all of us together as a congregation. I encouraged you to pray with me for God to begin to help us make a plan and for God to give us patience to pursue it.

And I hope you did that. I hope you prayed with me last week about the future of this church. And I hope you'll keep praying with me for God to put a plan in our minds, a wise plan. For I'm confident that if we pray and ask, God will do that. But I also know that plan will have consequences. It did for Esther and it will for us.

And that brings us back to our Scripture readings this morning. Because that's what they're all about: consequences. But do you think the consequences in Esther's life were reached on her own, as a result of her own logic? Or do they result from actions Esther took, actions that allowed God be at work in the background of her life and logic?

You see when I look at the book of Esther, what I see are a series of faithful actions that Esther took, faithful actions that allowed God to enter into her crisis with her and be at work beside her in the background of her life. And what were those faithful actions?

Number one: Esther accepted the reality of her crisis and stopped running away from it or trying to avoid it. Number two: Esther stopped listening to her own worries and fears and started to listen to God's call to her. Number three: Esther

committed herself to prayer, to making a plan and patiently pursuing it. Three faithful actions. And those three faithful actions produced consequences in her life.

First, as a consequence of accepting the reality of her crisis, Esther received clarity, clarity that allowed her to face into her crisis instead of running away from it. Second, as a consequence of listening to God's call, Esther developed a conviction, a conviction that freed her from fear and helped her realize God had put her where she was for just such a time as this. Third, as a consequence of committing herself to prayer, Esther found courage, courage to speak when at last God told her it was time to speak.

And I love Esther's directness in our Scripture lessons this morning, don't you? I love her. I love her willingness to tell the truth and point her finger. I love her willingness to point her finger where it needs to be pointed: at what's truly dangerous in the Kingdom of Persia ... the pride, the dangerous pride of a man who for the sake of defending his honor and his self-esteem was willing to sacrifice the life of a whole nation.

And Esther's willingness to point her finger at that pride reminds me of a story. I don't know how many of you like courtroom fiction. But if you like courtroom fiction I imagine you'll know about an author named Scott Turow. He's written eight best-selling novels in the last few years. And in one of his books, a book called *Presumed Innocent*, a prosecuting attorney named Rusty explains his approach to a jury to a colleague. Listen to the description.

Rusty says: "This is how I always start. I always say the same words. I say I'm the prosecutor. I represent the state. I am here to present to you the evidence of a crime. Together you'll weigh the evidence. You'll deliberate on it. You'll decide if it proves the defendant's guilt.

This man ... and here I always point, Rusty says. If you don't have the courage to point, he tells his colleague ... if you don't have the courage to point, you can't expect anyone to have the courage to convict. And it takes courage to convict. So I point."

And in the book of Esther, Esther does too. She points to Haman's guilt. She points to her people's innocence. She points to their need to defend themselves. And if you wonder where Esther found the courage to do all that, if you wonder

where her courage comes from, then remember this. It's a lesson that's meant for you and me and it grows right out of Esther's life and her story.

Courage always comes to us as a consequence of letting God be at work beside you in the background of your life. For when you let God work in the background of your life, as Esther let God work in the background of her life, you'll discover the clarity that lets you see a crisis for what it is. You'll discover the call that tells you, God wants you to do something about it, not run away from it. You'll discover a commitment welling up inside you, a commitment to prayer. And out of your prayers God will help you make a plan. And if you pursue that plan with patience and faith, the consequence will be when it's time to speak, you'll have the courage to speak and when it's time to take action, you'll have the courage to take action.

So take away these lessons from the book of Esther this morning, my friends, because they are life lessons well worth learning.

Let's pray ...