

"Crisis"

Esther 3:1-11 and Matthew 5:1-1

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First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

May 1, 2011

It's my least favorite beatitude. It's the one I keep running away from. But it's the one that keeps catching up with me. It's the last beatitude, the one that talks about being persecuted. And the reason I don't like it is because I like people to like me.

You see, like you, I'm part of a culture that values personal relationships above almost everything else. So when it comes to friends and family, I shy away from criticism or conflict. I tend to tolerate and try to get along. I put a bigger priority on accepting people's behavior than I do on holding them accountable for it. Bottom line: I want people to love me the way I am, so I try to love them the way they are.

But even love has limits! "Love is patient," First Corinthians says. But it "never rejoices at evil." Instead "it rejoices in the truth." So I suppose I should be rejoicing this morning that my message to you this morning is going to be about the truth. But I'm not rejoicing.

Instead I find myself feeling like I'm heading into a kind of worst case scenario as a pastor. I'll tell you why in a few minutes. I promise. But whenever I find myself feeling like that, like I'm heading into a worst case scenario, I'm always reminded of a book I discovered about ten years ago.

It's a book called *The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. And it's based on interviews with experts in different fields. It covers all sorts of situations like "how to escape from quicksand," or "how to deal with a charging bull." And sometimes, it's predictable. For example the first rule in the section on "how to deal with a charging bull" is ... "Don't antagonize the bull!" Surprised? I didn't think so. Seems obvious, right? But sometimes the advice isn't so obvious.

There's a section in the book, for instance, called "how to survive if your parachute doesn't open." This is what it says. "First, signal your jumping companion." (I noticed by the way that it doesn't say what to do if you don't have a "jumping companion!") Anyway the book says "after your jumping companion reaches you (and by now I'd be calling my jumping companion my new best friend!) Anyway, when he reaches you the book says, "hook both arms

together and open his chute. Get ready for the shock. It will be substantial. It may be enough to dislocate one or both of your arms. Hold on!

And remember, your rate of descent will be faster because you'll be twice as heavy. When you touch down, try to go into your roll more quickly than usual. That will minimize the injury to your legs." Comforting words, aren't they? Anyway, that's what you need to do to survive, the experts say, if you skydive and your parachute fails to open.

And now that you've got a sense for the book, I thought I'd give you a little test this morning, a little survival test. So here's the situation. And by the way, it comes right out of the book. "If you're hiking or biking and find yourself confronted by a mountain lion, what should you do?" That's the situation. Now I'm going to give you four options and let you see if you can figure out the right thing to do to survive.

Ready? OK. If you're hiking in the mountains and find yourself confronted by a mountain lion, you should:

- A: Run!
- B: Play dead.
- C: Open your coat and make yourself look bigger.
- D: Make quiet, soothing sounds.

Now which one did you choose? Let's do a quick poll.

Well, the correct answer according to *The Worst Case Scenario Handbook* is C: Open your coat and make yourself look bigger. Turns out, the book says, that's a natural defense gesture, and most of the time a mountain lion will back away from you. Now I know what you're thinking. "Like this is ever going to happen to me, right?"

But here's what the book says. "The big idea behind this book is really simple. You never know. You never know the curves life can throw at you; the situation that might be waiting for you around the next corner. You never know when you might have to make a choice that could be a life or death choice for you. So when you're called to make that choice, you might want to know what to do."

So now I want to turn your attention to a different book. And to tell you the truth, it reads a little bit like *The Worst Case Scenario Handbook*. You see, like the *Handbook* it's a story of how ordinary people, two of them reacted to a threatening situation in their lives, a life or death situation. And they were called to respond to it.

Their names were Esther and Mordecai. And the book of Esther is their story. And the story starts with a royal wedding. Did you see the royal wedding a few days ago. I didn't see the whole wedding but I did watch clips. And it was quite an event, wasn't it? A royal wedding always is. So imagine, if you can another royal wedding. Only this event is even more significant, because it isn't the wedding of a prince. It's the wedding of a king, a Persian king.

His name is Xerxes. And his queen is a young woman named Esther. And although Esther is Jewish, Xerxes doesn't know it. He's too much in love with her to ask and she's too much in love with him to tell. So Xerxes doesn't know. But Mordecai does. Because Mordecai is Esther's guardian, the family member who took her into his house when Esther's parents died and raised her as his own daughter.

And Mordecai never stopped caring for Esther, even after her marriage to the king. He used to go, the book says, and stand near the gate of the palace, hoping to catch a glimpse of her as she made her way in or out. But more often than not, the person Mordecai saw as he stood in the gate wasn't Esther. It was a man named Haman.

And the third chapter of the book of Esther starts by telling us Haman was a noble, a member of the king's court. And he had recently been elevated to new position at court. In fact, the book says, Xerxes had recently given Haman "a seat of honor higher than that of all of the other nobles." And as a result, "all the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman;" everyone that is except Mordecai.

And it took a day or two. But someone finally peeked around as they were kneeling. And when they peeked, they saw Mordecai. He wasn't kneeling or honoring Haman. And they wondered why. Maybe Mordecai didn't understand Haman's identity, or his need to respect Haman's identity. So the person who peeked told Mordecai. But it didn't make a difference. Because Mordecai still wouldn't honor Haman.

Instead He just said he was a Jew. And He honored the God of Israel. And for some reason, and we're never told by the way what the real reason is ... but for some reason, Mordecai knows that to honor God he cannot kneel to honor Haman.

Well it took a while. But Haman finally heard. The person who peeked told some people he knew. And together they went and told Haman. And when Haman heard, apparently he couldn't believe it. He had to see for himself. So

the next time he rode through the gate, he looked. And the book of Esther says, "he saw that Mordecai wouldn't kneel down or pay him honor."

And at this point, as I promised you when I started this sermon, I need to tell you something. I need to tell you why I'm feeling a sense of apprehension this morning, like I'm heading into a dangerous situation, a kind of worst case scenario. As I do though, I want you to hear me say this to you very clearly. What I want to say to you now I want to say in love. And please realize I mean that seriously.

Because the truth is, what I feel I need to say to you now may or may not be what you want to hear. And whether it is or whether it isn't, I hope you'll listen to me try to say it to you in love. Because it's in love that I remind you that love "never delights in wrong, but rejoices in the right." And so it's in love that I need to tell you the truth now. The Presbyterian church that you and I belong to is about to do something that I know is wrong.

You see, for centuries now, since the time of Calvin, the honor of ordination has been given by Presbyterians not to those who deserve it. For none of us who've ever received ordination can say we deserve it. You see all of us, deacons, elders and yes even pastors; we're all sinners, probably more than you'll ever know.

But God knows. And we deacons, elders and pastors; we know too. We know we're sinners. That's part of what qualifies us to be ordained. At least according to the current *Book of Order*. Because it says this. "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness."

And now listen carefully to the next few words. "Persons refusing to repent ..." (And I hope you heard the four words. Because they're tremendously important. Here's why. First because they affirm that all of us, even people about to be ordained are sinners. That's not really an issue. What is an issue though is how people about to be ordained choose to handle their sins. Will they let God be their one true Lord? Will they let His word determine right and wrong for them? Where they have done wrong, will they repent? Will they seek to turn away from any behavior, including sexual behavior that God calls wrong or sinful? Will they turn back to what God calls right?

"Persons refusing to repent," *The Book of Order* says, "of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained as

deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament." That's the rest of the sentence, the current standard for ordination in the Presbyterian church. And you need to know I believe it. I think it's the right standard, for everyone including people about to be ordained.

But sometime soon, probably in the next two or three weeks, the standard's going to change. You'll probably hear about it in the media. And the report will be that the Presbyterian church has decided to allow the ordination of homosexuals. But when you hear the report, I hope you'll remember. Ordination isn't really the point. Sexuality isn't really the point. The point is really about the definition of sin. It's about who defines the moral rules that tell us what's right and what's wrong in our lives. It's about whose word we will listen to on that. And ultimately, ultimately, it's about whether who we will honor.

And because that's the point, remember, as we face into this situation, although it may feel like a worst case scenario, the truth if it's been seen before. It's a lot like the scenario Mordecai met in the book of Esther. Who would he honor? Whose laws would he obey? And if you remember that, remember this too. Though we're not told why, when Mordecai realized that Haman was not a man whose life and standards he could honor, he didn't. He refused to take a knee.

But by refusing to take a knee he not only refused to honor Haman. He also refused to give up. And I hope you won't either. Because if the life and legacy of a woman named Esther teaches us anything, it teaches us this. God is big enough to handle any scenario and bring us safely through it. And next week on Mother's Day, we'll take a look at part of the way that God did exactly that in the lives of Esther and Mordecai.

Let's pray ...