

Me Too, Vashti, Me Too

Esther 1:1-5, 8-13, 15-22

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I.

I have to admit that I've had a lot of feelings this week about preaching on the topic of #MeToo. At first I was excited by the prospect of preaching about how the movement has empowered women and men who have survived sexual abuse and harassment. I felt the energy of prophetic preaching-- the righteous naming of systems and cultures that demean people-- and how important it is for the church to acknowledge its part in sustaining a patriarchal system that objectifies women. I was ready to be prophetic! I was ready to get my feminist groove on! But sermons are meant to be pastoral as well as prophetic, and when I considered the pastoral implications of preaching about sexual violence, I felt overwhelmed with grief, empathy, and tenderness. There are women and men in this sanctuary who may be survivors-- they have lived through a harrowing experience of sexual harassment, abuse, or violence, and they bravely sit in a pew today--brave, because they know all too well what this sermon is about. Brave, because maybe they had to convince themselves to be here today. Brave, because their injury may have happened in a church context. The words may catch in their throat, as they sometimes do for me, but in the safety of their heart a voice whispers "me too." If you are one of these brave survivors, this sermon is for you. If you are in solidarity with those who say #MeToo, this sermon is for you. If you are ready to be prophetic and want to change the patriarchal systems that objectify women, this sermon is for you. If you've never heard of the #MeToo movement and came to church today expecting something entirely different, this sermon is also for you!

So what are we talking about, when we say, "Me Too"? The #MeToo movement has created public space for discussion of sexual harassment and abuse in the mainstream. It has empowered people to share their stories, and ultimately affirmed that survivors of sexual abuse are not alone in their journey. In this way, #MeToo has become both a pathway to healing and a social force to end sexual violence. Way back in 2006, Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo movement to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities. Last October, when fires were burning here in Sonoma County, a different kind of fire began to tear through our country, and it was the purifying fire of the hashtag "Me Too." When actress Alyssa Milano tweeted "Me Too" in reference to the Harvey Weinstein scandals, the movement went viral. Women all over the world began tweeting "Me Too"-- women of all walks of life began to acknowledge publicly that they are survivors of

sexual abuse and misconduct. Time Magazine revealed its "Person of the Year" to be "The Silence Breakers" of the #MeToo movement. Alleged sexual abuser Roy Moore was defeated in Alabama, and politicians of all parties began to be called out for their abuses, some of them resigning in shame. The momentum has continued this Spring, with photographers, actors, and media moguls being called out, and sometimes censored, fired, or jailed for their unsavory actions.

And speaking of unsavory actions, borne out of a patriarchal system that objectifies women, our scripture reading this morning is the story of Queen Vashti. Don't worry if you haven't heard of Vashti before today-- the Book of Esther is hardly ever read in church, and even then, what we hear is not Vashti's story. As we shift into thinking about her, I invite you to consider why she has been pushed aside like a "dangerous memory." Rev. Anna Carter Florence, Professor at Columbia Seminary, says, "dangerous memories are what we think they are-- they're the memories that go underground because they are too damaging, too racy, or just too embarrassing to remember." Almost every family, workplace, industry, and religious group has "dangerous memories" that they'd rather keep quiet. So I'd like for us to hold in mind the question of why Vashti's story has been treated like a dangerous memory-- we will come back to that later.

Vashti, whose name means "Beautiful One"--is married to Ahasuerus, the King of Persia. The biblical account says that King Ahasuerus reigns over lands from Ethiopia to India. And at this moment in the story, King Ahasuerus is planning to conquer Greece, and he's throwing a great big party, presumably to impress the generals and leaders from around his empire and convince them to help him attack Greece. But this is no ordinary soiree with a nice potluck or farm-to-table meal-- no, the Bible says this party lasts 187 days--it's a brawling, sprawling, debauched "Animal House" level of party. And after weeks of drinking and impressing his guests, King Ahasuerus holds a garden picnic for the men. There isn't much left the king can do to show off to his companions. Meanwhile, back at the palace, Queen Vashti hosts the women. A woman of Queen Vashti's status would not have been gazed upon by men other than her husband and family members. So when the king summons Vashti to show his drunk friends how beautiful his wife is, he's already making what would have been seen as a socially improper demand. Add to that the fact that he demands she enter wearing a crown-- the implication is that she is to be wearing nothing else besides a crown--and his command is repulsive. Vashti refuses. If Oprah had been there, I bet she would have said, "King Ahasuerus, your Time's Up!" If Tarana Burke had been there, she might have tweeted, "#Me Too, Vashti, Me Too." Vashti refuses the king, and is sent away in disgrace. We never hear from her again-- and there is an assumption that she is probably executed. Hers is a costly act of defiance.

II.

So I hate to burst our bubble--even our quaint little Sebasto-Bubble-- but #MeToo is everywhere-- in our culture, the history of Christianity, and our sacred text, the Bible. The majority of accounts of women in the Bible could actually be considered #MeToo experiences. From Eve to Delilah to Bathsheba and the Concubine of Judges 19 (who is given to appease a mob of men). From Tamar to Dinah to Hagar, to the daughters of Lot (who are given by their father to appease a mob of men). From Mary Magdalene and the woman at the well, whose reputations have been smeared, to the daughter of Herodias (who is made to dance before Herod and a mob of men). Our biblical stories confirm that patriarchal misogyny, which is the system in which sexual abuse flourishes, has been around a loooooong time. Vashti is part of this long tradition of women whose stories have been cast as "dangerous memories."

III.

But I am excited to tell Vashti's story because it's incredible it has survived-- that it's even in the Bible is amazing, because Vashti offers a counter-narrative to the way women are usually portrayed in the Bible, as wives and concubines, harlots and tricksters. Vashti's story is truly a resistance story. She says NO to being treated like an object, NO to the male gaze, NO to dancing before King Ahasuerus and his mob of drunk friends. She averts a #MeToo moment, and in doing so she exposes the power system that's truly at play here.

When Vashti refuses, King Ahasuerus calls together his advisors to ask what ought to be done-- she has defied the command of the king in front of his friends. It is decided that her position is to be "given to one who is better than she." And by "better," we can only assume "more subservient" than she. No offense to Queen Esther, who follows Vashti, but the king and his advisors are looking to make an example out of Vashti. Did you hear it in the scripture reading? They want to send a message to all the other women, especially the noble women-- who are their wives. The leaders and officials are afraid that their own wives might follow Vashti's disobedient lead. The king's advisors say, "This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!" The men are afraid of a revolution. They're afraid the women in their lives will take to the streets with pink kitty hats and signs that say, "resist." They are so worried that they want a royal decree from the king himself, affirming that all men are the masters of their homes.

Their fear belies a hidden truth. The obvious truth is that yes, the power structures that enable sexual abuse have been around a loooooong time. But the hidden truth is-- so has resistance. And Vashti is an example of the spirit of resistance.

It brings us back to the question we've been holding-- why is Vashti's story held as a "dangerous memory" by our Christian tradition? Why don't we hear her story proclaimed in church more often? Is it because the same power dynamics that allow sexual abuse existed in Vashti's time, are still alive and well now? Is it because telling her story requires that we talk about sexual harassment and abuse, and preachers and congregations are uncomfortable with having that conversation? I wonder what would happen if churches began including Vashti in the Lectionary?

IV.

I wish we could go back in time and interview Vashti, and ask her how she felt after her act of disobedience. In lieu of that, I'd like to offer us some modern voices. The New York Times recently asked 20 people-- from Hollywood, the media, Silicon Valley and the manufacturing industry-- to speak, in their own words, about what came after they went public with their #MeToo stories. For many, it meant sleepless nights and tense family discussions, and questions about whether going public would get them fired. And yet, they felt emboldened, with a profound sense of release. And there was a sense of solidarity-- the #MeToo survivors built strength from one another. They, like Vashti, committed a costly act of defiance by going public with their stories. Here are some of their words, six months after they said #MeToo:

"The culture is listening to us"

"My anxiety skyrocketed"

"I just wept all the time"

"A veil of shame has been lifted"

"It was like a weight had been lifted"

"I felt so much anger and rage"

"I've been stunned by positive messages"

"I decided I was not a victim"

"I want to shout from the rooftops"

"Now the work has to happen"

Now the work has to happen. It's the work of excavating dangerous memories and speaking the truth. It's the work of "empowerment through empathy"¹ to form communities of healing. But, like the #MeToo movement, Vashti's story is not only for people who believe in gender equality. "This is a story for every person who has ever felt their integrity called into question, who has ever had to weigh the risks between their job and their 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."²

1. Tarana Burke

2. Anna Carter Florence