

“We Are Roadblocks AND Highways for the Kingdom”

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 Mark 9:38-50

Scott B. Martin - September 27,2009

I can remember when I was a boy going out for ice-cream at Baskins and Robbins. As much as I enjoyed eating ice-cream at home I particularly loved going out to eat ice-cream. At home there was usually never more than one choice for ice-cream, namely, whatever had been purchased at the grocery store the last time out; but at the Baskins and Robbins they had how many flavors? That’s right they had 31 flavors! Imagine that! They not only had vanilla, chocolate and strawberry, they had flavors like Amoretto, maple walnut, butter pecan, etc. They even had some special flavors that would be there only for a limited time! So many choices. I use to walk up and down, up and down, staring at all the flavors, trying to decide what to get. To help the decision along, after narrowing it down I would get a double scoop, one scoop of one flavor and the other a different flavor!

It is good to have choices, but some choices are far more consequential than what ice-cream flavor to choose. In our gospel passage today we find Jesus using some of the roughest, most damning language that he uses in any of the gospel. What is particularly scary is that he is not direction it at the Pharisees or Sadducees, he’s direction it at his disciples, and indirectly at all of us who are Christ’s followers today!

Can you think of anywhere else in gospels where Jesus is suggesting that people cut off body parts to keep from going to hell? **“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off!” “If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off!” “If your eye cause you to stumble, pluck it out!”** Even allowing for hyperbole and exaggeration to make a point, this is pretty rough stuff!

What is it that so has Jesus' dander up? To put it quite simply it is his passion for the Kingdom of God. For Jesus the Kingdom of God was the most important thing in the world. It was worth giving everything up for. It was even worth dying for. The Kingdom God was the foundation of everything he said and did. Every choice and decision Jesus made he made to promote the Kingdom. This is why we find Jesus praying so often in the Bible.

It was his greatest hope that all people whom he met would become full citizens of the Kingdom of God, that they would enjoy all the rights, privileges and blessings of kingdom citizenship and that likewise all would embrace the responsibilities of kingdom citizenship. Jesus said that anyone who placed a stumbling block in front of someone doing the kingdom's work they might as well tie a millstone around their necks and throw themselves into the sea!" Once again, pretty rough stuff. No gentle Jesus, meek and mild here!

The plain truth is that whether we are kings and queens, or presidents or members of congress; or whether we are parents, or garbage collectors, or teachers or hair stylists just living our everyday lives; we all have countless opportunities to make decisions that can promote the Kingdom of God in large ways and small. We all have countless opportunities to be stumbling blocks or highways for the kingdom of God.

Throughout our lives we are both stumbling blocks and highways for the Kingdom of God, often on the very same day, maybe even the same hour! The writers of our prayer for renewal today had it right. Maybe sometimes we would happily give up free choice and simply become "God-loving, Law-abiding robots" for the Kingdom of God. It is both our gift and curse to be stumbling blocks and highways for the Kingdom of God. It is one of

the most important things that make us human. From the opening pages of the Bible when Adam and Eve struggle with whether or not to obey God or whether to go ahead and eat the apple to the closing pages when people must decide whether to follow Christ or the Anti-Christ we find people deciding whether to be stumbling blocks or highways for the Kingdom of God.

Our prayer for renewal is right; sometimes it is just too much for us to be highways for the Kingdom. Our apathy, lethargy, greed, stubbornness, ignorance, busyness, you name it, gets in the way. As the writers of our prayer for renewal say, **“Hopefully [our] desire to make Good Choices counts for something. Hopefully [our] intentions to follow [God] can balance [our] inability to always see the Right Way. Hopefully [our] dream of servanthood will keep [us] moving toward [God] even when [we] don’t know where [we are] or where [God is.]** In other words St. Paul and Martin Luther we hopefully right, it all comes down to pure grace.

After one of the many wars that afflicted the nation of Israel many of the Jews were carried away into exile. Among them was Mordecai, whose intelligence soon made him a great asset to the king. Mordecai remained a faithful Jew, openly practicing his faith. Also among the Jews in exile was Mordecai’s niece, Esther, who was by all accounts a beautiful woman. Perhaps people around her were so dazzled by her beauty that they did not realize she was a Jew, or perhaps she was not that observant. The king made her part of his harem and over time she became his favorite, after queen Vashti fell out of favor.

Among the king’s advisors was an evil, vain and greedy man, named Haman. He became jealous of all of Mordecai’s success and influence with the king. To get rid of Mordecai Haman tricked the king into signing an order to kill all the Jews. Gallows were built to carry out the order in the

capital city. O how Haman looked forward to seeing Mordecai swinging from those gallows.

Esther prepares a banquet for the king and all of his advisors, including Haman. Now this was a very sumptuous feast and the food and drink lasted for two days. The king was so pleased with Esther and the banquet that he tells Esther she can have anything she wants, even half of his kingdom.

Esther could have asked for money, or jewels, even a palace; but here is what she said, “If I have won your favor, O king, and it pleases the king, let my life be given me –that is my petition – and the lives of my people – that is my request.” When the king asked what she was talking about she told the king that she was a Jew and that Haman had arranged for all the Jews to be killed.

The king became so furious that he orders Haman hung on the very gallows Mordecai and all the Jews were to be killed on. So it was that Esther saved the Jewish people. Now this was a happy ending for all but Haman and his family; but it didn't have to end this way. Esther took a great risk in revealing she was a Jew. The king, knowingly or unknowingly had signed the order Haman wanted. Esther put her very life in the king's hand, although she had done all she could to stack the deck in her and her people's favor. Esther through her choices and actions became a highway for the kingdom, not a stumbling block. She used what power, influence and gifts she had to pave that highway for the kingdom. To this day the Jewish people celebrate her life and her choices and lift her up as an example during the celebration of Purim. Every year the story of Esther is told.

Fast forward from Bible times to modern times, to the continent of Africa and the country of Liberia. Charles Taylor is the cruel dictator of this land, embroiling the country in civil war to take and hold power. While he lived

in luxury the country is bankrupted and ruined by war. Mother's sons were sacrificed to keep his corrupt administration in power. Someone must do something; but who? The U.N.? The United States, who has always had a special relationship with Liberia, because they sent some former slaves back there in the 1800's? The political and economic elite of Liberia? Other African nations? All had opportunities to do something; but they did little or nothing for a very long time.

In the end it was a group of impoverished market place women who simply had had enough. They did not want to lose any more sons. They wanted their children to grow up in peace, to have an opportunity to go to school and better themselves. These women, some Muslim and some Christian began to organize themselves and speak out. Slowly but surely they found ways to not be ignored. Even the dictator finally had to welcome them into his presidential palace to hear their cries for peace.

When peace talks bogged down in the neighboring country of Ghana, they traveled at their own expense. They barricaded the men in the conference room and told them they could not leave until a peace deal was made. The men couldn't even leave the room to eat! When guards tried to arrest the women they threatened to remove their cloths in protest. The strategy worked. The guards would not bring shame on themselves. In the end the peace treat was signed. Today Liberia has Africa's very first woman president and the country is healing. Charles Taylor is on trial for crimes against humanity.

A documentary has been made telling these women's story, ***Pray the Devil Back to Hell***. These women, at great risk to themselves, became highways for the kingdom of God. One of the main leaders of this movement is Leymah Gbowee. As a leader she heard many stories of

injustice and affliction. At times it became too much for her and she found herself at the end of her rope. She found herself at times questioning whether God was just. In those times she turned to pastors and religious leaders, she read her bible and prayed and prayed for strength and guidance. She also found great strength to go on from the women around her, she says of this, **“Women of faith have also proven to be my anchor when I feel like my strength is failing me through prayers and constant reminder of where God is taking me through my work. I count myself truly blessed having all the support from people of faith. I have no choice but to succeed in all that I set out to do because I have the prayers and the Grace backing me up.”**

She recalls a Catholic Arch Bishop advising her back in 2003 and mobilizing resources for the campaign. She remembers a Muslim Imam who spent an entire night at a prayer vigil that the women held. Even after all the Christian pastors had gone home for the night the Imam staid to give the women words from the Koran about the blessings of peace.

Imagine for a moment all the hundreds of thousands of choices made during this movement, by thousands of people. Many of these choices ended up being stumbling blocks to the Kingdom movement; yet many more choices made by modern day Mordecai’s and Esther’s became highways for the kingdom. May we honor them and may we be like them. Whoever gives even a cup of water to those building Kingdom highways will by no means lose their reward. Amen.