

“Dreams For a Time Like This”
Acts 2:14-28 & Esther 4:10-17

INTRO: Our first reading tells us the story of Pentecost, including part of Peter’s sermon where he outlines what God’s Spirit can do in the lives of Christ’s followers.

The story of Esther is one of my favorites, an orphan girl whose uncle Mordecai raised her and helped her win a beauty pageant, where she becomes the next Queen of the land, attaining a position of power and privilege. Her husband the King, issues an edict that all Jews should be killed, not knowing Esther is a Jew. Mordecai approaches her and urges her to speak out for her people. But Esther’s not sure she can do anything to help. She has her servant take a message to Uncle Mordecai, and this was his response to Esther’s hesitance.

For over thirty years, at the end of the school year I’ve been using the same movie for confirmation classes, called *And Then*. It’s a movie about the confirmation Sunday of ten young people in a Swedish church, and it is a wordless parable. There’s music, but no dialogue to accompany the action. And each year, I explain to the class that yes, this movie was created in the late 1970’s, at which point somebody usually reminds me that’s when their parents were born. They may laugh about the hairstyles and clothing of the people in the film. But over all these years, this little fifteen minute movie never fails to evoke comments and discussion. The classes usually start discussing it and asking questions before it’s even over. The movie’s title helps them to think about what it means to be confirmed *and then* continue to live out their membership vows in the life of the church. Because this Swedish Confirmation class begins as ten, *and then* by the end of the movie there are three of them left, as active participants in the church. The other seven have somehow left those commitments behind and moved on to other things. After all these years of watching this movie, I realized that even though it’s the confirmands who see it, and discuss it, there are some ideas presented which are pertinent for both these young people and the rest of us.

The continuing symbol throughout the movie is a big red book—given to the young persons as they are confirmed—perhaps symbolic of the commitment to Christ and his church, that this young person has now said “yes” to. One scene is of a family heading off on vacation, and there is no way that big red book will fit in their car with all their belongings. So they drive off, and the red book is left behind on the front stoop. Another scene is of the confirmand caring for a job in the church, in this case, putting the hymn numbers up on the number board hanging in the sanctuary. But an adult walks in, and maybe the young man hasn’t done the job as the older person would do it, and motions him out of the way. The newly confirmed fellow leaves his red book behind, because what’s the use if the church won’t let him serve—won’t let him use the gifts he DOES have. One of the girls is “shushed” in worship, when she’s trying to open up her big red book, because she’s making some noise and not doing things as her elders might do them.

Yes, it’s the decision of these young persons to choose to join the church today, but it continues to be the responsibility of all of the rest of us to support them in their faith journey. They are not done yet—in fact they are just getting started. They need to have families who continue to help them find space in their lives to be a part of the ministry of the church. They need the rest of us to mentor them and help them recognize the gifts they have which they can share with this community. They need us to build them up, not tear them down. They need a faith community that is willing to do things differently here and there, is open to enough new ideas that teenagers can find they fit here, as well as those of us who’ve been around this community for 25-80 years.

This past week I’ve been reading posts from our UM General Conference—the every four year meeting of the decision making body of the UMC. One tweet asked the question, “Out of curiosity how many people under the age of 50 have any influence or decision making ability at General Conference?”

I don’t know the numbers, but out of 850 delegates, I would suppose that those under 50 don’t make up a large percentage. One of our delegates wrote: “We sometimes inadvertently dismiss young people by referring to them as ‘the church of tomorrow.’ We forget that there will not be a church tomorrow unless we respect and acknowledge the young as the church of today.” (Dan Dick)

Which brings me to today—to Confirmation Sunday, and to Pentecost. Pentecost is the time when we recognize that the Spirit of God moved in the lives of those early followers, so that all of them had an understanding of the Spirit's presence, and the encouragement to live out God's leadings—perhaps in new ways.

Pentecost is the “wholehearted expression of the almost unlimited imagination of God.” (John Macintyre) The Holy Spirit is an experience, let loose in the church and in the world, of the imagination of God. At the first Christian Pentecost, God breathed this Spirit and changed the followers of Jesus. They were new creatures.” (Larry Broding)

Pentecost reminds us the times have changed—something new has begun. The Spirit encourages us to speak the gospel in ways that the world can understand—people of all ages, nations and races, as our membership vows say.

My sense is that our young people can help us with this. My experience has been that they don't see differences in people to be nearly as important as they seem to be for some of the rest of us do. They may not have the same desire to figure out who is included and who is not, who we listen to, who we don't.

Our Scripture tells us everyone will be given God's Spirit, our sons and daughters, young and old, men and women—they all will have the possibility of truth-telling, “what the Bible calls prophecy, naming the places and ways God is at work in the world.” (Matt Skinner)

For all of us, will we give credence to this truth-telling? Will we recognize all of us as valued participants in our faith community? And will we all take seriously the call from God, to be truth-tellers? To sometimes take a difficult role standing up for somebody else, what I would call Esther moments.

Esther was offered a possibly life-changing moment. She was in a situation where she may have perceived she was fairly safe. She was the queen—a Jewish queen though. And even though her husband the King issued an edict that all Jewish persons were to be killed, he didn't know she was Jewish. Upon hearing the request that Esther take a stand for her people, people who didn't have her position of privilege, Esther hesitates. Yet her uncle Mordecai reminds her that she may not be as safe as she thinks, once her husband finds out who she really is. And precisely because she is queen, maybe she's the person right at that moment, who can help her fellow Jews. Perhaps she was meant for this role, because she could be the person who stops this awful edict. Esther steps up, devises a plan, and the Jewish people are saved.

I would think that throughout our lives, no matter our age, we are confronted with Esther moments. We may have the sense that somebody should step up and speak out, step up and help someone else who doesn't have a voice, who may not be in the majority position, who needs someone to speak the truth and stand up for them. And maybe that somebody is us.

Tex Sample tells a story of when he was fifteen years old, he was in awe of a rising young businessman in his community, Tom Burns. “Tom was articulate, funny, personable and engaging. Tex identified him as someone he wished he could be like.” One day Tom asked Tex if he wanted to go with him to do a little business. Tom sold insurance and was headed across town to make a payment on a life insurance policy. Tex was thrilled to be chosen. Before he knew it, they were headed into the “quarters,” the part of town where people of color lived. And before he knew it, Tex was headed with Tom into the house of one of those families, where a wake was being held for the father of the family—the breadwinner of that family. Tom spoke his condolences to the widow and then told her he was there to help her out. He had the proceeds of her husband's life insurance policy, \$600 in cash--probably more money than the people in that room had ever seen. It would help pay the bills and make things a little easier. But before Tex knew it, Tom Burns was convincing the widow that for \$300 she could take out a fully paid up life insurance policy on herself, leaving her \$300 to help with her bills. The widow told him that really wasn't what she wanted to do, and then Mr. Burns said, “Auntie, I am trying to help you, and I don't think you understand what we're doing here. I said you should buy this new insurance policy paid in full. Do you understand what I am saying?” She realized that she had to do what he said just to get half her money, and she responded with ‘Yassir, Mr. Burns, give me the papers.’” Tex knew all along that this woman needed all that \$600 and more and he stood there looking at the floor. “He knew perfectly well that something terribly wrong was being done. The claims of simple justice pulled at him but his courage shriveled.” (*Earthy Mysticism*)

That was when he was 15, and I imagine it must have been one of those life changing experiences for him because I know Tex and I've not known him to shy away from addressing injustice. He has spoken out when others have gone incredibly silent. I've seen him standing up for others, especially when he might have been the person in the right spot at the right time, who took his truth-telling role seriously.

May someone like Tex, and someone like Queen Esther, assure all of us, no matter our age, that when those Esther moments come along, we had best pay attention. And figure out that maybe we are there for a specific reason—to work out God's justice in that particular place and time.

--Sue Burwell