

Suggested Scripture Readings:

Esther 1:1-12, 16-20

Psalms 116:1-14

Matthew 5:3-12

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

Saying No: A Sermon for Break the Silence Sunday, 2015

Esther 1:1-12; 16-20

Galatians 5:1

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

Saying "no" is complicated in Fiji. A kind-hearted Fijian will try her very best to help friend or stranger - and will avoid saying "no" if at all possible. Any Western English speaker will tell you that one of the first things a person learns about the Fijian language is that "Vinaka" means both "Thank you" and "No thank you!" So, the correct response to "Would you like a cup of tea?" is never "No." Instead, one says, "Vinaka..." with just the right tone of voice. Saying "no" is complicated.

Especially if you are a woman.

There is a sign that hangs in the Class Eight room of a local girl's school. The sign reads, "Girls were meant to be seen and not heard." The sign, of course, is meant to encourage these girls to study hard instead of chatting away, but there is something about the sign that makes a person stop and think. Do we really mean to tell these young girls that their appearance on the outside - how they are seen - is more important than their thoughts or their voices? Do we really mean to tell them that girls were not meant to be heard and taken seriously?

We may not intend to teach these things to our girls - but we do teach them. In small ways and large, we tell our girls to be agreeable and quiet. Never to risk speaking first in a room full of men. And if at all possible...never to say "no."

And some of this is virtuous. Respect for elders. Attentive listening. A cheerful attitude... these are good qualities in both girls and boys. But the problem is this. There *are* situations where a "no" is exactly what is needed.

Most of us grew up in Sunday School hearing stories of Queen Esther - the brave queen who risked her life for her people. When Esther's people were in danger, she broke the rules and came to king's throne room uninvited to ask for his favor. It was an act that could have meant her death - and yet, it saved the Israelite people. This is a story we know well. A woman put in place of privilege and power - "for such a time as this." (Esther 4:14)

But there is another woman in the Esther story. We read about her in today's passage - Queen Vashti - the Queen who was exiled before Esther became queen. If

we have ever heard of Queen Vashti at all, we probably heard of her in negative terms. We were told that she was rude, proud, and disagreeable. A woman who got what she deserved.

But this is a poor interpretation of our text. Queen Vashti was much more than the disrespectful woman that she is described to be... And on this Break the Silence Sunday, she has a powerful lesson to teach us on the cost and power of saying no.

Notice some things with me about this text. Let us look carefully.

*Notice...*the king of Persia, the one who condemns Vashti for not showing enough honor, is not a godly man. He is proud, easily swayed by the opinions of others, and he is a drunkard. This king had spent seven days in a drunken stupor, bragging of his power and greatness to his officials. Seven days of wild talk, flowing wine and inappropriate behavior... all this, before he makes his request of Vashti. The text makes clear that this is a man whose opinion should be handled with suspicion. His interpretation of Vashti's behavior is that she is trying to put him down and embarrass him. But his interpretation cannot be trusted.

This raises a question. If the king's interpretation of Vashti's "no" is wrong - then why *does* Vashti say "no"? Vashti knows that saying no will probably cost her the crown - and perhaps her life. One does not say "no" to the King of Persia, especially when he has been drinking for many days.

Perhaps, however, her "no" is not so hard to understand. Is it strange that Vashti would be unwilling to go into a room full of drunk men who want to stare at her and scrutinize her? Men who want to make her the subject of inappropriate jokes and likely much worse? Make no mistake. When King Ahasuerus asks Queen Vashti to come before him "in her crown" - he is asking her to come into a dangerous situation. Some scholars even suggest that the drunk king has asked Vashti to appear wearing *only* her crown. This is not some difficult wife, incapable of showing honor. The king is asking Vashti to compromise her safety, her person and her principles. He is asking her to submit to a violent situation. And Vashti says, "No."

I pause here to say a word to the women in the congregation today - though what I say is true for men as well. There will come a time in your lives when a person in power may ask you to do something that will compromise your safety, your person or your principles, and when that happens - remember the example of Vashti. You are daughters of the King of the Universe. No matter your earthly family, because of your baptism, you are part of the royal family of God. You can say with confidence: I am a child of God. You have the Holy Spirit within you. God's own son, Jesus Christ, came to this earth to live and die for you. You are precious - and you have a calling. There is a reason you were born, and it is for more than "being seen." Your first responsibility is to that calling and to Christ. If *anyone*, your boss, your political leader, a member of your own family - even your spouse - asks you to submit to a request that would compromise your convictions, your safety or your self-

worth...you can say no. Indeed, your commitment to Christ compels you to say no. It is not dishonorable to protect the light that God has put within you. It is not dishonorable to protect the mind and body God has given you.

It may, however, take all the courage that you have. Because as the story of Vashti makes clear, there is sometimes a high price for saying “no.”

Notice... how Vashti’s simple refusal to be put at bodily risk infuriates and frightens the king and his officials. Pretty soon they are talking as if the entire family structure of Persia is going to collapse because one woman decided to stand up for her principles and her safety. Vashti’s name and reputation are dragged down. Her crown is taken away. She is an ungrateful woman, they say. A pushy woman. A proud woman. A common woman. They said it then...and they still say it about women who risk speaking up against something that is not right. Vashti is not mentioned in the book of Esther again. She fades away, and we begin to wonder... Is it worth it? Perhaps the cost of saying “no” is too high. Maybe its better to be seen in our crown ... than heard from our hearts.

Do not be deceived. We serve a God who sees and hears – even when the world does not. Queen Vashti shaped the future more than she ever knew. Years later, when Esther came, trembling before the King, with the entire Israelite population was at risk, *notice...* the king does not strike her down. He responds differently. He waits. He reserves judgment, he swallows his pride – and though he could have ended her life, he lets her live. Queen Vashti paved the way for that transformation. Esther 2:1 tells us that the king *remembered what Vashti had done* and the unfairness of his response. Apparently, she was not so easily forgotten. Maybe the King decided that he was done pretending that women could be easily replaced. He was done with losing a woman he loved – a woman of good sense and high principles - because he was afraid of what others would think. He didn’t want Esther to be the next Queen Vashti. He wanted to write a new story.

Queen Vashti may go unmentioned throughout the rest of Esther’s story – but she paves the way for Esther’s bravery. She paves the way for Esther’s tenacity. She paves the way for Esther’s victory.

And the same is true of us. Our “no” to the injustice of this world paves the way for the victories of those who follow us – and the victories of those who may not be able to say “no” on their own. This is why Break the Silence Sunday is so important – not just for women who find themselves in dangerous situations, but for all men and women who take seriously Paul’s challenge in Galatians 5:1. *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”*

Stand firm and say no – to any situation where the strong bully the weak.

Stand firm and say no – to any situation where violence is used to control and silence.

Stand firm and say no – to any situation where a child of God is treated like a possession rather than a person.

Stand firm and say no – to any situation that makes a child of God afraid to shine the light that she has been given.

The House of Sarah in Suva is a ministry that gives confidential counsel and referrals to women who experience domestic violence. The statistics are shocking. 2 out of every 3 women in Fiji have experienced some form of sexual or domestic violence. 2 out of 3. And 25% of women are living in situations where domestic violence is a current danger. Every month, the House of Sarah hosts a gathering of men and women from many different Christian denominations – Methodist, Catholic, SDA and more - who are working to say “No” to violence in the home. These leaders have chosen to be “Vashtis” for the next generation...for all of us. They have chosen to say, “Enough is enough.” They have risked speaking about this issue even when those around them misunderstand their motives and are tired of hearing about it. They have risked speaking about it even when their efforts seem forgotten.

And this is why.

They know that there is an Esther waiting in the future. A woman who will have an important job to do and will face a dangerous situation. By God’s grace, they are paving the way.

Will you pave the way, as well? Will you risk saying “no” when “no” needs to be said – in spite of the cost? Will you risk being a “Vashti” who shapes the future? For make no mistake. God holds your life and your daily decisions in God’s hand. And God lets no act of courage and honesty go to waste. You may never know the impact of your choice, but because of the Spirit’s work within you, your integrity, courage and self-respect will change the world. They may even be the instruments that God uses to save God’s people.

Finally– it is God who holds the future and it is God who determines our worth. So be brave and be bold. Be seen and heard. Break the Silence.

Be the Vashti Christ has called you to be “for such a time as this.”

For you are a child of God.

Amen.