

August 1, 2021 – WRCOB

"Maybe You Were Born for a Time Like This"

Esther 2:2, 4, 6-8, 16-17, 3:1-7, 4:1, 8-16

French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in the last scene of his play *No Exit*, writes the famous line, "Hell is other people." Though the line is blunt and shocking, some of us really believe it, at least part of the time. We are like the woman who found some hell in her husband. They were walking in the park and noticed a young man passionately kissing a young woman on a bench. "Why don't you do that?" she asked. "Honey, I don't even know the woman."

Individualism or separating ourselves from other people has swept the western world and our society. On the surface, we seem to be communal in a society filled with the social media of smart phones, the internet, Facebook, and many groups like secret fraternal orders, service clubs, trade associations, social clubs, garden clubs, women's clubs, theater groups, church groups, whatever. On the surface, we seem to be aware that we are not sufficient unto ourselves.

Yet social media and the groups themselves often separate us into fragmented parts and diverse factions, where everybody and every group has a grievance. The groups are typically seen as a conglomeration of individuals whose personal desires are elevated to needs and rights. Beneath all the social connections and groupings is a quiet superficiality that often results in profound loneliness.

A woman named Noreena Hertz recently wrote a book entitled *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart.* In the book she says we are in the midst of a global loneliness that

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struck long before the social distancing and masking brought on by a pandemic. One in 5 millennials in the US say they have no friends, and 15% of men admit having no close friends. Sixty percent of nursing home residents in the US have no visitors. In Japan, those aged 65 and older often commit crimes to they can live in jail and avoid social isolation. Many of us have migrated to cities, lost a sense of community in the workplace, and are less likely to attend a house of worship, belong to a parent-teacher association, or participate in trade union than people in the past. Some of the lonely join right-wing groups. All these practices affect overall health and work productivity, for humans evolved and survived because they connected with one another. Hertz thinks our governments need to massively rebuild the infrastructure of community, including vital gathering places like libraries, playgrounds, and youth clubs. As individuals we need to slow down, reconnect, talk to neighbors, those who might be lonely, show more gratitude to those who care for others, and say thank you to our partners, our friends, and our colleagues.

A popular movie in the 1980's was *The Breakfast Club*. In the movie, five of the most dissimilar, incompatible teenagers imaginable are thrown together for all day school detention one Saturday. The club members build a variety of relationships, only to break them down to take various sides in lively verbal battles, each concerned only with self. Until - - until in a poignant scene, one boy displays multiple scars on his arm, each the size of his abusive dad's cigar tips.

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Suddenly superficiality and disregard for one another breaks down. The five-start talking to each other, and listening. They reveal their hurts and secret dreams, big and small. For the first time in their lives, they try to understand someone different from themselves. They cooperate, connect, and the common thread of community unites them beyond their individualism.

We all realize how rare such connection is. Even in the church community we often see faith as mostly individual and personal, with little need for the larger church. Well-known preacher, UMC bishop, and Duke University Divinity School professor, Will Willimon tells of the time he preached a sermon from Deuteronomy, advocating the need to teach values to children and church members. A 19-year-old girl registered her disapproval by saying, "I think faith values should not be imposed, but developed by the individual person in the depths of his or her heart." Willimon looked at her and then said, "And where did you get that value?" Slowly it dawned on her that the personal, individual right to choose was a value imposed by society and those around her.

We look in vain for Biblical support of pure individualism segregated from community. There were prophets like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel who stood alone. But they did it for their communities. The Book of Esther is a book about the need for community. The book is set in the context of the 5th century BCE, the time of the Persian Empire. The Jews had been dispersed first to Babylon and

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then to various places of the world, places like the city of Susa in Persia. They lived in colonies, came under the influence of other peoples, and were in danger of losing some of their basic convictions.

Esther is kind of a strange book. The story contains little religious conviction and no implicit mention of God. There is little charity and mercy shown, mostly hatred and slaughter. Probably the only reason the book made it into the Jewish scriptures was because it gave background to the popular Jewish festival, the Feast of Purim.

The Book tells how King Xerxes, having disposed of a rebellious queen, selects a beautiful young Jewish woman named Esther as the queen's successor. Haman, one of the king's officials, takes offense at the studied contempt of a Jew named Mordecai, who unknown to the Persians, is the new queen's cousin. Haman is an Amalekite. The Amalekites were long-time enemies of the Jews from the days of Samuel, who told King Saul to wipe out all of them, even their babies and livestock.

Haman seeks to wipe out Mordecai and his contempt by persuading King Xerxes to decree a massacre of the Jews. But Mordecai gets Esther to intervene at risk of losing her own life. She does, and the Jews are allowed to defend themselves on the day the decree is to take effect. When the king hears of Haman's plot from Esther, Haman is hung on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The Jews rejoice in their deliverance, and that rejoicing is celebrated in Feast of Purim. Purim means "lots,"

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referring to the lots Haman used to establish which day was decreed for murder of the Jews.

The Book of Esther proclaims the importance of the faith community. From its pages there are at least 3 lessons. First, the Book of Esther tells us the faith community needs to claim its own. The Bible affirms over and over again that we find fulfillment in the community of faith.

Esther is a name whose meaning is connected to the word for "bride." The Bible pictures the people of God as the bride of God, a bride created and loved by God.

God creating and loving a faith community is like Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of the famed German composer. Mendelssohn was short in stature, and grotesquely humpbacked. One day he met the lovely daughter of a merchant in Hamburg. He fell hopelessly in love with her, but she was repulsed by his misshapen appearance. She had trouble even looking at him. When it came time for him to leave, Moses gathered his courage and climbed the stairs to her room to speak to her one last time. She was the vision of heavenly beauty, but she still wouldn't look at him. Shyly he asked, "Do you believe marriages are made in heaven?" "Yes," she replied, looking at the floor. "And do you?" "Yes," he said. "You see, in heaven at the birth of each boy, the Lord announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. Then the Lord added, 'But your wife will be humpbacked.' Right then and there I called out, 'Oh Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a

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tragedy. Please, Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful." The merchant's daughter looked up into his eyes, stirred by some deep memory, and a love she had never before known. She reached out and gave her hand, later becoming his devoted wife.

God claims his own. We don't primarily become a part of the community of faith merely to meet our needs, to teach our children values, to be with some people we like, to experience good music, or to embrace the quiet. We become a part of the community of faith because God claims his own and invites us to.

Esther was a beautiful person and could have simply kept to her own business, without remembering her people. But she realized she had true life only as a faithful member of the Jewish community, and they could have life through her. That community claimed her as its own.

Second, the Book of Esther tells us the community of faith needs to face its enemies. Haman represents the Amalekite enemy, all the potential enemies of the Jews. We are often unaware or in denial of the enemies and fragmenting powers around us. But like Esther, we are invited to deal with enemies. Mordecai tells her, "If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved, but you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows - - maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen." (Esther 4:14) Note the lack of desperation on Mordecai's part. The community will go on, sustained by

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God, no matter what. It is only individuals who cut their ties to the community who will pass away. We need to remember this in a time of pandemic and the tendency to isolate, thinking we can make it on our own, even without vaccination shots.

Many times in the larger community, and even in the community of faith called the church, we try to avoid destructive forces by being quiet or resigning ourselves or separating ourselves into individual worlds. We give in or accommodate. But the Book of Esther tells us there are times to resist, to risk everything, to go for broke. As famed Catholic monk Thomas Merton put it, "The last thing in the world that should concern a Christian or the church is survival in a worldly sense. To be concerned with this is an implicit denial of the victory of Christ and the Resurrection."

Lastly, the Book of Esther tells us the community of faith is to proclaim its joy. Purim became the most joyous of all Jewish feasts, second in popularity only to the Passover. Purim, which comes in early spring, is a time to give gifts to friends and charity to the poor. It is a time of partying, the Mardi Gra of the Jewish faith. Rabbis taught that during the feast of Purim it was permitted to drink until one didn't know the difference between "blessed be Mordecai" and "cursed be Haman."

As Jesuit priest and mystical scientist Pierre de Chardin put it, "Joy is the infallible sign of God's presence." Such joy is almost always connected to God and the community

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of faith. The outrageous joy of a community of faith lies at the heart of fulfilled humanity. Jean-Paul Sarte said, "Hell is other people." But the scripture tells us "Heaven is other people."

A classic story about the joy of community is told of the woman given a visionary view of a supposed heaven and hell. In the vision, she first saw hell where the people were all seated at a huge banqueting table. But they were in agony, starving because they had no elbows and could not get the food to their mouths. Then the woman saw heaven with people seated at a similar banqueting table. Even though they had no elbows, they were filled with joy, full and satisfied, because they were feeding each other. Whatever else heaven is, it is a sharing of love and kinship, bringing forth the fire of God's holy joy. That is the witness of Esther's story. Let that be our witness too.