



## Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

January 29, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Esther 4:10-14

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 16:24-26

### Risky Faith

Children on bicycles, parents pushing baby strollers, college kids moving into dorms, and people in wheelchairs use them daily. But most of us do not even know what they are called, let alone who is responsible for them. Those tiny ramps connecting sidewalk and streets are called “curb cuts,” and thanks to Ed Roberts we all enjoy their convenience.

After polio left him a quadriplegic at age fourteen – unable to move below the neck except for his fingers on one hand, and dependent upon an iron lung to breathe – he had all but given up. Laying on his back one day he heard a voice, “You can either let this condition defeat you or you can defeat it” Roberts argued that there was nothing he could do, to which the voice always said, “You can give up or give it your all” Day after day, he argued with this voice until one day he insisted he be sat up so he could face this voice in his room. What a surprise, when he looked out and saw a man in a wheelchair paralyzed just like him physically, but so filled with life that he able to move in so many other ways.

Thanks to a motorized wheelchair with a portable respirator on the back, he gained his freedom and in faith he moved forward.

In 1962, he became the first severely disabled individual to attend a college at the University of California at Berkeley. He slept at night in an iron lung at Cowell Hospital, endured newspaper headlines like “Helpless Cripple Attends UC Classes”, and put up with fellow students hurling insults at him while he struggled to attend class in buildings not designed for his wheelchair.

Through his example and struggle other severely disabled men and women enrolled. Roberts led the way to getting ramps installed, wheelchair repair services started, and personal care attendants hired. He was also a leader in his church and a very faithful man who spoke often of how God’s continual presence sustained him and opened his eyes to see the people in his path to heal his paralysis of fear and hopelessness and let him walk down paths he would have never dreamed of.

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After graduating from Berkeley, Roberts went on to teach political science at his alma mater, ran California's Department of Rehabilitation, married, and served as president of the World Institute on Disability. Oh, and he lobbied successfully for the Americans With Disabilities Act that requires businesses and governments to make accommodations. The most visible are the curb cuts we all use everyday.

In March of 1995, Ed Roberts died of a heart attack. Virtually every street corner in America testifies to this man who, while confined to a wheelchair, refused to sit down, sit back, and keep quiet about the needs of the disabled. He risked much, endured a lot, and proved that one person can make a difference.

However, too many people simply dismiss any possibility of accomplishing something remarkable by saying, "Oh, I could never do that,"

The best way for great causes to fail is for good people to do nothing. "Let someone else tackle that problem. What can one person do against the system?" We hear these responses from people who then list a whole host of excuses. Throughout the pages of the Bible we find people who were willing to take a risk in order to make a difference. These men and women saw that something just was not right and they could no longer tolerate it. They felt they had no other choice than to take a stand. Oftentimes taking a stand places us in an unpopular light. When we take a stand we place ourselves at risk. We risk our reputation, our social standing, and occasionally even our economic well-being. Many are afraid to take a stand for precisely those reasons; they are fearful of the risks involved. It is easier to sit back and do nothing than to stick your neck out. When you stick your neck out, you risk having someone chop it off.

That is exactly what Queen Esther faced in our reading today. This reading from Esther is very compelling in that it is one of many stories in the Bible corroborated by archeological evidence. Stone tablets have been found in modern day Iran briefly mentioning the name of a Jewish princess named Esther who ruled with King Xerxes during a time of conflict. You see, Esther was a Jew, orphaned as a child and raised by her cousin Mordecai in the Persian Empire where the Jews were slaves. Esther's beauty, charm, and intelligence helped her rise quickly in the court of king Xerxes. She caught the king's eye and he made her queen and later when she stopped a plot to kill the king, she became invaluable to him. However, no one knew she was a Jew for Mordecai told her that to survive she must blend in and hide her heritage.

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However, this all changed when she learned of a plot by one of the king's closest advisors, Haman, to kill all the Jews as a way to kill his enemy Mordecai and all the Jewish people he despised. Mordecai came to Esther to tell her that she was the only person who had the power or influence to stop this evil plan. As he tells her in our reading – “But who knows but that you have come for such a time as this” Something had to be done, but what could any one person do? If she confronted the king, told him who she really was he might put her to death for lying about her heritage? Or he might put her death simply for imposing on him, since no one told king Xerxes what to do.

This information weighed so heavily on Queen Esther that she prayed and fasted for three days. Even though she was the queen, Esther could not just march into her husband's court and talk with him. However, Esther could not wait until the king called her; she had to see him as soon as possible. It was a matter of life and death. Esther rose to the occasion and risked her life by confronting the king.

It was one thing to warn the king about some fanatic plotting against him, but it was quite another to warn the king that his most trusted advisor had devised a plan to kill her people.

So, Esther devised an ingenious plan. She hosted several banquets for the king and his advisors. At the third banquet everything came to a head. As the king was sipping wine Esther made her daring request. "What is your petition, Queen Esther?" the king asked. "It shall be granted you. Even to half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled," he promised blindly. This was the moment that Esther was waiting for. "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people --that is my request." Esther could have sat back and did nothing, but she confronted her fear - took a risk in admitting the truth that the Queen of Persia was in fact a Jew, descended from slaves. Further she boldly asked for the lives of her people to be spared. Esther reminds us that there are times when we need to stand up to fear and take risks. But more than that she is a shining example that one faithful person really can make a difference.

When we reflect on our lives, it just might be the risks we have taken or failed to take – because to try and fail is often time not a failure - that best define who we are. Esther risked her very life in exposing Haman's evil intention. Before the day was over Haman was hung on the very gallows that he had hoped to see Mordecai hang on.

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The book of Esther challenges us to use our God-given voices and our lives for the work of God's mission and salvation. Only God knows what might happen to us and others as a result of our faithful witness – because as our scripture states – we have been called for just such a time as this.

The story of Esther reminds us that we are not to remain comfortable in the growing shadow of poverty. Remain silent in the midst of terror and injustice. Remain unmoved by the suffering of this world. For when we take a stand, when we risk our actions we can make a difference in the world.

Taking risks, being bold is hard because like Ed Roberts and Esther it is scary to risk. But without risk, without facing our fears, there is no growth. Because our fears paralyze us. Our fear causes us from living as the disciples, as the whole people that God created us to be. Our fear diverts us from using what God has entrusted us with. Our fears causes us not to risk, but to bury our very being.

For we are called this day to live out our faith. To stand up as Esther did and speak out when things are wrong. For it is wrong that children in African nations die of diseases we have a cure too simply because they were born in a poor country. It is wrong that children live in conditions of neglect, in crime drug ridden neighborhoods and we just accept that this is the way it is. It is wrong that slavery still exists, that racism, is still with us.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus told his disciples, ‘if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’ This verse speaks to the mission we have each been given to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ for the world. For Jesus says to us this day - Pick up your cross - Follow me on a mission of love. Follow me on a mission of compassion. Follow me on a mission of hope.

For all it takes if for us to wake up everyday and use all the blessings and gifts we have been given in all the places where we find ourselves on a daily basis to live out our faith in words of hope and deeds of love.

Because we have been called for a such a time as this to follow the narrow path and be disciples of Christ sharing God’s love and taking up our cross every day.

For example take Nikki Taylor who was diagnosed in seventh grade with leukemia. Nikki went through the necessary chemotherapy and the resulting loss of hair. To be different as a seventh grader is a kind of death. Without hair, Nikki

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was very different from her peers. She was a generally popular girl, but still she faced hurdles. Kids would sneak up behind her and snatch her wig off. People would stare and laugh. No one would sit with her in the cafeteria or in math class, and the lockers on either side of her's had been vacated. Nikki told her parents through her tears that she could handle losing her hair. But the hardest part of her illness was losing her friends.

Her parents gave a choice of staying in school or withdrawing and being home schooled. Nikki prayed and listened and felt the peace and confidence and courage to go back to school because she knew she wasn't alone. A larger love and presence was there for her. Nikki set out for the school the next Monday. Her parents drove her. When she got to school, Nikki hugged and kissed both her parents. Then she said, "Mom and Dad, guess what I'm going to do today?" Her eyes began to tear up. "Today I'm going to find out who my best friend is. Today I'm going to find out who my real friends are." Then Nikki took off her wig and set it on the car seat. "They take me for who I am, Daddy, or they don't take me at all. I don't have much time left. I've got to find out who they are today." Then Nikki and her parents prayed and she walked into the school. Not a single person bullied her or taunted her.

Nikki went on to fully answer her call when she helped set up support groups for other kids going through what she went through. Nikki passed away five years later, and her life, is a testament to what is possible when we have more faith than fear, when we take the risk to pick up our cross and let the light of hope – the light of faith shine.

To become like Christ and experience life at its fullest level we have to make an effort and make a commitment. Nothing shapes our lives more than our commitments. We become what we are committed to. So, let us like Esther commit our lives to being the people of God.

So that in our daily lives we do risky things like extend forgiveness as we give people a second chance, or speak out on behalf of the weak and powerless, or perform acts of kindness and compassion to people completely different from us.

As we center ourselves on the one sure thing that is never risky, that God is with us. For the courage we need lies in our prayer, our devotion, our worship life together. The closer we are to God, the more strength we have and with that source of courage and strength behind us and in us, our faith may be as small as a mustard seed but it can move mountains.

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Only God knows what might happen to us when we, as individuals and a community, are willing to stand tall, to stand up for what we believe in even though there are risks involved. But let us resolve to find out. Because it all starts with realizing that one faithful person with their eyes and heart open can make a tremendous difference in this world. Amen.