

### Queen Esther's Guide to Being an Effective Ally

When it comes to the books in the Bible, Esther is...well, odd. It's odd for three very distinct reasons. First, strong women making decisions that were uncharacteristic of female characters in literature in this time period and in this culture propel the plot forward. Without them there is no story. And aside from the book of Ruth, that's pretty weird for the Bible. There's Vashti, the queen who refuses her drunken king-husband's command for her to dance wearing only a crown in front of his guests. There's Zeresh, the wife of the antagonist, who shrewdly advises her husband throughout the text. And then there's Esther, who saves the Jewish people of Persia from destruction. Second, the book is odd because there is very little mention of Torah Law. And this is vital to the story because it means that Esther can pass as a gentile within the King's court. There is no mention of dietary or cleanliness rituals that would set her apart as definitively Jewish, and she *marries* a gentile! Finally, Esther is really the only secular book in the Bible. Throughout the text there is absolutely no mention of the divine – which is weird for biblical text. This is really a book about people and how people are called to act towards one another especially when one person has power and another person (or group of people) doesn't.

To be clear, in this story, Esther is the one with the power. Because she can pass as a gentile and because she is married to the king who is quite taken with her, she has access to and influence over the one man who can set policy for the entire empire. But she *is* also Jewish, so she is uniquely connected to a religious-ethnic group that is oppressed by Persia. And this dual identity comes to be of vital importance when Haman bribes the king to sign a decree ordering the eradication of all Jews in Persia because

Esther is the only ally of the Jews in the court, and she is thus the only one able to change the situation.

Maybe this sounds just the tiniest bit familiar. There is a lot of talk these days about how to be an effective ally to those who have less power and access in society than you do. For instance, how can you be an effective ally to those in the black community if you're white? Or how can you be an effective ally to those in the LGBTQ community if you're straight or cis-gendered? Or how can you be an effective ally to those in the immigrant community if you're a citizen? Or how can you be an effective ally to the disabled and differently abled if you are quote unquote *normal*? And Queen Esther gives us a really good guide for how to go about doing that, in part because she starts off by getting it *wrong*.

**Rule one in Queen Esther's guide for being an effective ally: accept and validate the way that the minority is feeling, even if it makes you uncomfortable.**

Here's the first thing that Esther gets wrong. Her uncle Mordecai mourns in sackcloth and ashes, crying and wailing in the middle of the capital city of Susa, when he learns that the king has ordered the destruction of the Jews. And Esther, not understanding the root of his emotions, wants to make him feel better – so she sends him new garments to put on in place of the sackcloth. It's a well-meant gesture, but the message that it sends to Mordecai is that he shouldn't be grieving or protesting or making a scene. And I would wager that his emotions make Esther feel uncomfortable.

As the Black Lives Matter movement started gaining ground and marching through the streets of cities where black men and women had been killed by state institutions, I heard a lot of people – white people – asking questions like: why do they

have to do that? Why can't they find another way to get their point across? Don't they realize that all lives matter? Truthfully, the marches made a lot of white Americans feel uncomfortable – perhaps much like Mordecai's mourning made Esther feel uncomfortable. After all, he was very public in his display of outrage, and he was probably pretty disruptive too. Well, I later read an article written by a professor of African American studies who said, essentially, that what many white Americans didn't understand was that the anger that led to these marches was about far more than these killings – it grew out of centuries of injustice and oppression. He went on to say that after years of *trying* other methods of protest, these demonstrations felt like the only way to adequately express the community's anger and protest. And, finally, of course all lives matter – the point is that, throughout American history, black lives have mattered *less*, and so the call is for society to recognize that they matter *at all*.

Like Esther, we who seek to be allies may find ourselves in positions where we feel uncomfortable with how another community is expressing their emotion. Instead of trying to stifle them, we are called to honor their experience.

**Rule two in Queen Esther's guide to being an effective ally: be informed!**

Part of the reason that Esther wanted her uncle to stop his mourning is that she had *no idea* what was happening outside of her own little court world. She didn't know about the king's decree, nor did she know about Haman's bribe. She had no clue that her people were about to be massacred. She needed to be educated. And she went right to the source for that education – to Mordecai, who knew the lay of the land, and to the edict itself. She didn't just blindly trust court gossip or the chatter at the city gate; she did some research to understand the situation better.

We have a *lot* of news sources at our disposal – some better than others. And we’ve seen how reading a headline on social media (ahem, facebook) or the internet without checking sources or background materials can have a deleterious affect on our nation. The truth is that we all need to be digging a little deeper. We all need to be checking facts and listening to different sources – and most importantly, listening to those who actually *experience* the stories firsthand.

On the radio this past week, I heard someone from the National Federation for the Blind interviewed about accessibility. Near the end of the time, the interviewer asked how people could be good allies to the blind. And the first thing that this man said was, “if you see a blind person on the street, and you think they might need help – don’t assume, don’t grab their arm to direct them, don’t offer unsolicited advice – first say hello. First, recognize them as a person. Then you may ask, ‘can I help you with anything.’” But he went on to say, “If the person says, ‘no,’ accept that as an answer without getting upset! You have to understand that we experience the world differently than people with sight. We use hearing and feel, so we may know exactly where we are but still pause to feel for the button to cross the street or to listen for an approaching bus.” Now I’ve worked with the blind before, but I’d never heard this advice. And this is *really* helpful because *I* would totally ask if a person wanted help before saying hello!

Like Esther, we need to dig deeper in order to be informed. We need to learn from the experiences of those in minority groups, and we need to fact check the news that we read so that we can act effectively.

**Rule three in Queen Esther’s guide to being an effective ally: use the power that you have, even when it feels risky.**

In the story, this one's pretty straightforward. Esther is afraid to use her power and for good reason. But without her, genocide will occur. It takes some encouragement from her uncle and some time for discernment, but the Queen ultimately takes the risk and uses her power on behalf of those who have none.

And honestly, this is the bottom line for those of us who have power (and we may have power in some spaces and not in others, at some times and not at others, with some groups and not with others): after listening to those who are in the minority or who experience oppression, and after spending time in discernment ourselves, we are called to use the power that we have in the spaces where we have it for the good of those who have none, even when that feels uncomfortable or risky, even when we are at first hesitant to do so.

The Biblical witness – Queen Esther's witness – is that we are called to be effective allies. And to be effective allies we need to accept and validate the feelings of the minority, even when it makes us uncomfortable. To be effective allies we need to be informed – both by doing our research and *listening* to those who know. To be effective allies we need to use the power that we have in the spaces that we have it to *act*. May we all follow in Queen Esther's far-from-perfect footsteps and strive to be effective allies ourselves.