The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
(often Worldwide Communion Sunday)
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; Mark 9:38-50; James 5:13-20

If the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time occurs on the first Sunday of October, that is Worldwide Communion Sunday, in which most of the Protestant churches throughout the world celebrate the Lord's Supper as a way of symbolizing our unity in Christ.

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 contains the central scenes of this book, as it illustrates through the astute use of power by Esther, queen of the Persian Empire, how human action is the key to achieving God's intentions on the earth.

The story of Esther begins not with this Jewish woman but with her predecessor on Persia's throne, Vashti. Overwhelmed with the beauty of his wife, the Persian emperor Ahasuerus (Xerxes) orders Vashti to appear naked before his courtiers at a banquet, so that all can be impressed by her beauty. Offended by his demand, Vashti refuses and is therefore banished from the royal court. The king divorces Vashti and then begins a search for her replacement. He finds a woman of equal beauty in Esther, a Jewish virgin presented to the king by Mordecai (her adopted father, a strategic player in the emperor's court and a Jew), marries her, and has her crowned as Persia's new queen (Esther 1-2).

Later, Mordecai uncovers a plot against King Ahasuerus, reports it to Queen Esther who reports it to the king, who then stifles the plot (2:19-23). This action on Mordecai's part plays a strategic place in the later actions of the king and his court.

Another courtier, Haman, is seeking to build his personal power and influence in the court. He sees Mordecai as his chief rival and both more favored and trusted than himself because of Mordecai's uncovering of the plot against the king. How can Haman eliminate his rival? Recognizing that Mordecai was personally impervious because of his favor with King Ahasuerus, Haman devises a plot to exploit Mordecai's national origin as the means to eliminate him (3:1-6).

Haman tells the king that the Jewish people "do not keep the king's laws" and are, by their very existence, a threat to the monarchy and the peace of the empire. Therefore, he proposes that on a particular day (the thirteenth day of the month of Adar), all Jews would be hunted out, killed, and their property confiscated by the state. Ahasuerus agrees, unaware that both Mordecai and his queen are both Jews (Haman is very aware that Mordecai was a Jew – that's why he hatched the plot, but there is no indication in the book of Esther that he realized that Esther was a Jew, also). The king gives the order for the purging of the Jews (3:7-19).

Mordecai soon gets word of the king's order, considers his options, and realizes that the only person who has the capacity to influence Ahasuerus in this matter is Esther. He goes to her and pleads his case, pointing out to her that her status as queen will not protect her from the king's command (4:1-14). He then ends his plea with the words for which the book of Esther has become so well known: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14b)? Esther commands Mordecai to organize the Jews to hold a fast on her behalf as she pleads the Jews' case to the emperor, and then concludes, "After (the fast), I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (4:16).[1]

Esther devises a scheme to present her case before Ahasuerus that will make him more responsive to her request. She plans a banquet for him and invites Haman to the banquet. She then gets the king's permission for the banquet (must less risky than making a direct request of him to change the law). Esther holds the banquet for the two men, gets the king to agree to another banquet for the three of them, and Haman, overwhelmed with such an indication of his unique and high status in the empire, becomes overconfident. He thus begins plotting Mordecai's death during the Jewish purge by having a gallows built upon which Mordecai can be publicly hung (5:1-14).

Haman's plot is temporarily compromised by the king's decision to honor Mordecai for his uncovering of the plot against the king (6:1-13). Mordecai is thus honored and that honoring grates terribly on Haman, but he bides his time. And his time finally comes.

Esther holds the second banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman. And it is at that second banquet, with the guards down of both the king and Haman, that Esther launches her use of the power at her disposal (that is, her status in the kingdom and the unique relationship she has with the king as his wife, lover and queen) to protect the Jews.

Ahasuerus, overwhelmed with the beauty and generosity of his queen, magnanimously declares to her, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you – even to the half of my kingdom" (7:2). Esther's response, our Old Testament lesson for today, is a plea. "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. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated." (7:3-4). Of course, the response of the king was, essentially, "What are you talking about?" And Esther spills out the entire plot of Haman.

The king "rose from the feast in wrath", and went out into the garden to compose himself. He realizes how Haman had played him for the fool, and what an injustice the king has committed against the Jews by his unthinking declaration made upon Haman's report. Meanwhile, Haman is stunned at the news that the queen is a Jew and would therefore come under the same edict that would eliminate Mordecai and the Jews. He sees not only his plot but also his entire career and even his life unraveling before his eyes. He throws himself at the queen's feet (she is lying semi-reclined in the dining fashion of the day) to beg her forgiveness and to attempt to salvage his plans. But the king returns, uses Haman's compromised position as a means for ridding himself of this man, and has him hung on the very gallows Haman had constructed to hang his rival, Mordecai (7:7-10). Haman had literally been "hoisted on his own petard"!

[1] In going to the king and requesting him to change the law, Esther is not doing a light thing. It was against Persian law for anyone to enter the presence of or speak to the king – not even his wife! To do so was to court death. Further, an edict made by the Persian emperor was considered inviolate and could not be rescinded (it could be modified). Therefore, in approaching and speaking to the king on this matter without being bidden by the king to do so and to ask him to change the law, Esther was placing herself in danger of being killed on the spot!

With all his heart, the king desperately wants to reverse the decree he had made. But Persian law prevents him from doing so. Therefore, on the advice of Esther, Ahasuerus makes a second decree that, when the day of persecution occurs, the Jews may arm themselves and given permission to wage war against their persecutors until their Persian foes are annihilated. Further, the king promoted Mordecai to the leadership of Persia under the king and assigned him the responsibility to implement this decree (8:1-17). The result was that the Jews defended themselves and their enemies were wiped out (9:1-17). The feast of Purim was inaugurated in order to commemorate the Jews' deliverance through the fearless intervention of the queen of Persia (9:18-32). And everybody then lived happily ever after (10:1-2)!

What is particularly important about this story is its exploration of the use of relational power in order to transform empires! It is a lesson in the Godly use of power. As the queen of the Persian Empire, Esther had the potential for acting powerfully, but she had not exercised that power. The crisis that the Jews faced, together with Mordecai's confrontation of her, caused Esther to access that power. She would not have acted except for the relationship of trust and love she already had for Mordecai, which caused her to both listen to him and to take what he said seriously. Mordecai's emphasis that she was in as much danger as the lowliest Jew caused her to act out of self-interest. But that self-interest was enlightened, in that it was acted upon, not simply to protect herself but to defend all the Jews.

Likewise, it was because of her relationship with the king – not as the queen but as his wife – that caused Ahasuerus to listen to her. Her handling of him through the two banquets was designed to cause him to become increasingly open and receptive to her – in fact, even grateful, so that he would take most seriously what she would request of him.

Finally, it required immense courage on Esther's part to act; she could have as easily been killed for entering the presence of the king unbidden as she could have been warmly received by him. But because of the relationship she had with Mordecai and her love of her own people, she was willing to risk her life. Thus, Esther is a most excellent example of the effective and compassionate use of relational power.

But we also see power being used unilaterally, both by Haman and the king! Haman was concerned only with his own advance in the kingdom and the emperor was concerned only with protecting his throne. The actions of both men were from the "top-down", in which they commanded what was to be done, and thus sought both to preserve their own power and to control and even manipulate the situation. Haman was particularly manipulative, even managing the king! His entire strategy was one of building his own unilateral power through the elimination of the one he perceived as a rival (intriguingly, Mordecai didn't have that opinion of Haman) though he had done no wrong but instead had faithfully served the king. But Haman was also astute enough that he was able to manipulate the king into passing the most destructive of legislation that would be designed to destroy an entire people solely for Haman's own personal gain.

The book of Esther is about power – the exercise of power unilaterally to further one's own ambitions and to oppress an entire people. It is also about the exercise of power relationally, demonstrating that, if one carefully analyzes and understands the scope of his or her power, one can work within even the most corrupt system to bring about good. The entire book magnificently demonstrates how human action can achieve God's purposes in the world. The result of Esther's intervention on behalf of the Jews established the feast of Purim as a permanent festival to remind Israel of its deliverance from the greatest empire of its time, just as the Passover was created to remind Israel of its deliverance from Egyptian bondage – the greatest empire of its time. And both stories of deliverance occur because of one person who obeys God and is willing to deal with the political and economic power of their respective times.

There is one bittersweet note in the book of Esther. The concluding chapter of the book praises King Ahasuerus for being willing to perceive the wrong and to act to correct it. It also praises Mordecai for using his power for the benefit of the Jews and, eventually, for the entire empire. *But it nowhere mentions Esther!* It is as if she had not been a player in this great work of liberation. And yet the entire success of the mission depended entirely upon Esther. It was she who risked her life to come before the king unbidden and to eventually convince him to change the law sufficiently so that the Jews could defend themselves, and to get rid of the horrible influence of Haman. It was Esther whom God had brought to this hour, and she had used that hour to save an entire people from annihilation. And yet the very book that tells her story so graphically doesn't even mention her in the credits at the end! Could that have been because she was a woman?

Psalm 124 is a most dramatic hymn, to be sung as the Jewish worshippers ascend Mount Zion to Jerusalem's Temple. The worshippers sing together:

"If it has not been the Lord who was on our side" – let Israel now say – "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters" (124:1-5).

This psalm is divided into two stanzas, the first being verses 1-5 and the second being verses 6-8. The psalm itself is a communal hymn of thanksgiving for a dramatic deliverance from a significant peril. What that peril might be is not stated in the psalm, and determining that peril is pure conjecture. Some have suggested that it was Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem that was lifted by God's miraculous deliverance through his angel of death (II Kings 19:14-37; Isa. 37:14-38). Others have suggested that the psalm reflects the effort of the Gentile leaders of Canaan to gut the work of the Hebrew people under Nehemiah as he led them to rebuild their walls (Neh. 4): But whatever might be the occasion, this psalm was written to praise God for his miraculous deliverance of the nation of Israel from almost certain annihilation of their capital city, Jerusalem.

Both stanzas use vivid images to describe the danger that Israel had been in. The first metaphor is that of a primordial monster whose voracious jaws were about to consume Israel and carry them to the world of darkness and evil ("they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us" vss. 2-3). The second metaphor is a raging flood, sweeping all of Israel before it (vss. 4-5). The final metaphor is of a hunter, seeking to capture birds by spreading a net in their flight pattern so that they become entangled and die (vss. 6-7). All three images are used to show the chaos, inundation and overwhelming destruction that these opponents of Yahweh and Israel have brought upon the nation.

But "if it had not been Yahweh who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been Yahweh who was on our side, then they would have swallowed us up alive" (vss. 1-3). The salvation of Israel was not due to Israel's actions or even the actions of a great leader. Israel was simply overwhelmed by the power that was threatening them. Their liberation came about purely because of God's miraculous intervention on their behalf.

What is particularly significant about this psalm is the wording of the opening theme: "If it had not been Yahweh who was on our side". Some translations get it wrong when they write something like, "Had not the Lord been on our side" (NLT, NEB, CCD). The New Revised Standard Version gets it right when it translates the line, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side". What the psalmist is seeking to say here is not simply to thank God for inserting God's Self into their dilemma. It is much more powerful than that. What the Psalmist is doing here is to compare and contrast Yahweh with the other gods of the time. If it had been Ba'al, or if it had been Marduk, or if it had been Amon-Re who had been on Israel's side, then they would have been defeated. But it was not Ba'al, Marduk or Amon-Re. It was Yahweh – and therefore their success was guaranteed. To get the full force of the Hebrew, substitute the name of other gods for the words "wealth", "political and military power" and "values of greed, power and sex" – and then you get what the author is seeking to say.

The psalm then concludes in its second stanza, "Blessed be Yahweh, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of Yahweh, who made heaven and earth" (vss. 6-8). It is Yahweh who has rescued them. And who is Yahweh? He is the maker of heaven and earth. He is the Creator of the universe and of us, as well. And thus he is the God who is not only over the armies and stratagem of those who oppose Israel (that is, the God of history); he is also God over the primordial monsters of death or of evil, over the torrents and floods that would otherwise sweep Israel away (that is, the God of creation).

The spirit of this psalm is best caught in the traditional African-American response, "The Lord has brought me through thus far". That refrain puts the focus of praise where it needs to be. It is God with us, for us, and in the midst of our struggles that "has brought us through thus far". It is not our own effort or energy, nor is it the other "gods" in which we might believe (like America, capitalism, democracy or individuation). Successful living comes from humble living – the recognition that our triumphs, our victories and even our defeats are all orchestrated by God who will "bring us through thus far". So we can join with the psalmist in declaring, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (124:8)!

Mark 9:38-50 consists of two stories, one dealing with the wish of the disciples to ostracize a man who is casting out demons in the name of Jesus (9:38-41) and the second a series of teachings by Jesus (9:42-50). In both stories, Jesus is dealing with the community of those who follow Jesus and work for his kingdom – the first story dealing with community boundaries and the second with community solidarity. In essence, they deal respectively with the “good outside” and the “bad inside”.

In the first story (9:38-41), Jesus’ disciples come to the Master, telling him of a man they discovered who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. They tell Jesus that they told him to stop this practice, because he was not one of those who officially were following Jesus (e.g., the twelve disciples, the seven women, individuals called by Jesus but not a part of the disciple band, etc.). Jesus takes umbrage at their action and says to them, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (9:39-41).

A dynamic that is at work in this story that is never mentioned but is clearly behind it, is made plain by a previous story. In the healing story immediately previous to this story (Mark 9:14-29), the disciples were unsuccessful in trying to cast out a demon (Jesus had to come to their rescue). Now, they try to stop someone else who is not a part of their disciple band in casting out demons in Jesus’ name. What the disciples couldn’t do this man was doing – and this man was not even a part of their fellowship! The disciples want no competition. And they particularly want no competition from an outsider.

What the disciples were concerned about was that, simply because this man was invoking the name of Jesus in his healing of people didn’t mean that he was a follower of Jesus. Many magicians and faith healers both within Israel and pagans throughout the Roman Empire invoked the names of other gods than their own in their healing of people (for example, see this at work in Acts 19:11-20). So, just because this man is healing in Jesus’ name doesn’t make him a believer.

But what Jesus is teaching the disciples through this incident are the principles of inclusivity and co-belligerency that must be essential to the forwarding of God’s Kingdom. The disciples are concerned about competing power. Jesus is concerned about using everyone who is willing to be used for the advancement of justice. In the work of building the kingdom, all are welcome – even those with whom Jesus might not be in theological or even spiritual agreement. For “whoever is not against us is for us”! Jesus is seeking to cast a wide net, bringing in to the work of the kingdom not only those who claim Jesus as Lord and savior, but those who do not but who are committed to working for political justice, economic equity, elimination of poverty, and building a culture of relational power. Jesus is spreading wide the boundaries of his movement – bringing into that movement any from the outside who are “good” (that is, are committed to the same social, political and economic goals).

What Jesus is actually teaching here is the essential principle of relational power – the principle of “co-belligerency”. Simply put, co-belligerency is the belief that people don’t have to think the same to work together for the good of humanity. Others don’t have to agree with you on the doctrine of the Trinity or even confess Jesus as savior and Lord for all of you to work together to reduce crime in your community or to fight for decent housing for all the people! You can join with others who don’t believe as you do to work for commonly agreed upon objectives to bring about justice in your community or city.

Thus, Jesus is teaching his disciples a valuable lesson. If this man is successfully casting out demons in Jesus' name (after all, you disciples weren't able to do this act of justice), then all the more power to him! Let him do it – in fact, encourage him to do it. You might not get credit for it. Your church might not get credit for it. Not even Jesus might get credit for it. But human beings are being freed of demons. And that is right and good. That advances the kingdom of God! Wherever justice and equity and relationships are being accomplished, *there* is a manifestation of the kingdom of God!

In the first story, Jesus draws wide the boundaries of the Christian community. In the second story (9:42-50), he deals with community solidarity.

What should life be like in the community that follows Jesus, the Master in essence asks? It should have three marks to it. First (as demonstrated in the previous story), it must be inclusive, inviting into its fellowship people who are committed to building the kingdom of God, even if there are theological differences.

Second, it is to be a community that is committed to the care and nurture of the weakest and most vulnerable in its midst. Jesus puts this in terms of not putting a "stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me" (vs. 42). It is clear form the context that by using the term "little ones", Jesus is not referring simply to children, but to any who are struggling with or are new to the faith. Jesus is here again giving a lesson on power. Unilateral power would lord it over people, dominating the people by creating a "pecking order", excluding those who don't believe quite the way we do. But Jesus' kind of power – relational power – would be entirely different. It would be exercised to set people free, to liberate them, to build them up and to send them forth. Inconsiderate or egotistical power (for example, power that would be exercised to exclude from the community healing actions that the disciples can't do) calls for the most extreme punishment possible ("it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea"). So, second, the Christ-like community is the gathering that uses its power to build up, strengthen, encourage, equip and liberate people so that they can become all that God intends them to be – not to control or to manage them.

Third, the Christian community must exorcise the "bad" from "inside" itself (9:43-48). We must "cut off" the offending hand, foot or eye from our midst. Jesus, of course, is using an exaggeration in speech to make his point. If your hand offends you, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye makes you stumble, gouge it out. Of course, he doesn't mean this literally. What he does mean is that the Christian community has the responsibility to be discerning. It is, at one and the same time, to be inclusive, working with those who are committed to common social objectives. It is to be protective of and nurturing to the "little ones" within its midst, as it seeks to both liberate them and to work for their maturation in their deeds, words and life. But it is also to root out evil from its midst. It is to work against either the corporate practices of the community or the private practice of its members that result in people being treated unjustly, minorities being ostracized, wealth being inequitably distributed, poverty being tolerated or ignored, its members acting in relationally destructive ways or people no longer nurturing their relationship with God. All actions that can eat away at the foundation of the community must not be tolerated within the community, but must be "cut off" and tossed aside!

Jesus then concludes his teaching on the characteristics of the community he is creating, with the words, "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (9:49-50).

Salt, in the ancient world, was not only used to give zest to food but also as a preservative. The Christian community, Jesus is saying, is to act like salt to the world. It exists on behalf of the world. It exists to bring both zest to the world and to preserve in the world God's intentions for all human society. And the church can do that only by joining in co-belligerency with non-Christians who are committed to the same social goals of justice, equity and relationality as is the church, including them within the church's exercise of relational power to transform society. The church is salt when it nurtures those in its midst toward an equal commitment to engagement in the politics, economics and social life of the world, and when it roots out from its midst all those who are not committed to the return of society to God's intentions for it. If it doesn't build its community solidarity and boundaries around such an understanding of its mission, then the church will have "lost its saltiness" and can no longer "season" the world around it. So, Jesus concludes, "have salt in yourselves" and only then will you be able to truly be a community of shalom to the world!

James 5:13-20 is the final passage on James studied in the lectionary. In these final words of this epistle, James presents concluding advice to the Christian community. In doing so, it is almost as if he had the teachings of Jesus regarding the characteristics of the Christian community (Mark 9:38-50) in front of him!

James deals with how the church is to deal with situations it faces within that community that weaken it. "Weakening" takes several forms, James suggests. There are those in the community who are facing severe physical illness or emotional or physical suffering (5:13-15a). There are others wresting with sinfulness that needs to be addressed by the community (5:15b-16a). And then there are those who have gone astray and may have already left the community (vv. 19-20). How can the church respond to these difficulties in its midst?

James' answer is simple. Pray for one another, he responds. Pray for the community. Pray for those who are sick, for those who are wrestling with sin. Even pray for those who have left the community and have gone astray. "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective", James reminds his church (vs. 16c). He holds up for the church the illustration of Elijah in his passionate and continuing prayer both for Israel and for individuals (I Kings 18:42). It is that kind of determined, steadfast prayer that brings about a profound change in people. So it should not be lightly dismissed.

In reality, James is presenting prayer as a model to Christians of the power of relational power! Prayer, by its very nature, is relational. It is one person or a community of people sharing with God (and with each other) their extreme concern about another person or people within or even outside that community. It is, ipso facto, relational. And therefore, it is the ultimate expression of relational power – a power that will not even let God go until God blesses the ones who are praying by both answering that prayer and acting in the lives of those brought to God in prayer. It is the community in action – in action with and toward God on behalf of those about whom the community is so deeply concerned. And therefore, it "is powerful and effective" – the very epitome of authentic Christian power!

(Cycle B Ordinary Time 26.doc)