

I think Esther is one of the most under appreciated stories by Christian folks. It is one of the few stories in which a woman is not only named but is in a position of power (though limited power of course). It is a story about risking everything by speaking truth to power and standing up for people who are considered “other” and “less than” the dominant power.

We may not be royalty, or rulers of a nation, but each one of us has some form of privilege and power. We may not even be aware of it. Being part of the dominant culture is a form of privilege. Depending on what the situation is, the dominant culture may change. In general, in the United States, and in Brainerd Minnesota, the dominant culture is white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, middle-aged, Christian, who do not have a disability. You’ll notice that most of these characteristics are not things that someone chooses or something you can earn. That’s what makes them a privilege. Living with privilege doesn’t guarantee that your life won’t be hard or that you won’t experience challenges, but it means your identity is not the reason you face those challenges.

In a culture where existing as a white person is considered the norm and held up as the standard, those of us with white skin experience privilege in big ways and small ways all the time. But when one is part of the dominant culture, that privilege often goes unnoticed. It just seems normal. But those who do not have that privilege are frequently treated differently and at the simplest level, are living in a world in which their experience is seen as outside the norm. Think about the film industry. When a movie comes out and the entire cast or the majority of the cast is white, the movie is considered mainstream. But if the majority of the cast is black, the movie is often viewed a movie for black people. This is changing slowly. Moonlight won the Oscar for Best Film in 2016. But Moonlight was only shown in 1,564 theaters and ranked 92nd in total gross ticket sales compared to the top grossing films which were shown in more than 4,000 theaters.

Think about going through the world as a man vs. a woman. For the most part, men’s existence is considered standard. I grew up learning that when writing, “he” was the default pronoun it was even called the “generic” or “neutral” he. If you were writing a

set of rules, for example, you would write something like “Every student should complete his homework on time.” This standard has changed and will continue to evolve, but we still see male privilege in big ways and small ways. When have you ever seen a “unisex” t-shirt that wasn’t just a men’s shirt with a different name? Or the fact that clothing that is marketed to women rarely has truly functional pockets. Finding a dress or a skirt with pockets gives me way too much joy. Even women’s pants will often have fake pockets or pockets that are just big enough to hold a lipstick and maybe a credit card.

These may seem like small things but they are tangible examples of the way privilege and the lack of privilege shows up in our everyday lives.

Privilege in and of itself is neither good or bad, what matters is how we use it.

Esther has a lot to lose - her comfort, her status as Queen, her very life. Each of us has some sort of privilege and accompanying power in our life. Our call as people of faith is to use that privilege and power to lift up others who do not have the same privilege. What this looks like will be different for each person because each of us has different access to power and privilege and our lives present us with different opportunities for using that privilege. You may have heard the recent news story about a man who pulled a gun on a group of teenagers at a McDonald’s in Eden Prairie. The teens were black and of Somali descent and a few of the girls in the group were wearing headscarves that indicated they were likely Muslim. The man with the gun was white. The story is that the teenagers were have some difficulty using Apple Pay to pay for their food. The man made a comment that they were probably trying to pay with EBT which is the modern version of food stamps. Things escalated quickly and the man pulled out a handgun and aimed it at the teens as he backed out of the restaurant. But it’s what happened next that shocked me. Instead of calling the police, the McDonald’s management immediately told the teens to leave the store. They were being told to walk out to where the man who just threatened them with a gun may still have been present. I can’t imagine this happening to a group of white teenagers. The managers may not have been consciously thinking about skin color or religion or nationality, or even their

age, but I simply can't imagine that if a black man pulled a gun out and threatened a group of white middle aged people, that the management would yell at the them to leave and put themselves in danger.

So if you are white and were in that McDonald's as a bystander, what would you do? Would you mind your own business? Or would you intervene? In this situation, standing up for the teens doesn't put you at much risk and yet many people would hesitate to get involved. There was a white man present who stood up for the teens and confronted the manager who was yelling at them to leave. Although she argued with him briefly after a few seconds she walks away and in the video you can hear one of the teens saying thank you.

I certainly hope this is not a situation any of us would ever find ourselves in. Esther certainly didn't expect to find herself in the position of risking her life and her status to save the lives of her people. But Mordecai reminds Esther that what we do our privilege matters - maybe you became Queen for such a time as this. There are opportunities around us all the time to use our privilege to help others. Simple ways and big ways that we may not notice if we don't pay attention. Ways in which we can work to bring wholeness and peace to the world around us. As a straight, white, cisgender, Christian person, as a pastor, as someone without a physical disability, I have a certain degree of privilege and power.

Maybe all of the things that had to happen to put me in this place at this time—choices that I made and choices that were made for me, things I controlled and things that I didn't—put me here and now for a reason: to bring peace to someone. And maybe all of the things that had to happen to put you in this place at this time, put you here and now for the same reason: help someone... anyone. And maybe—just maybe—all of the things that happened to put us in this place and this time, put us here for an even bigger reason: to help someone... anyone... everyone. How much are we willing to risk when God calls on us to stand up for the vulnerable and marginalized? To break the chains of oppression? To fight for the lives of people whose very existence is being threatened. Maybe we were too were created for such a time as this.