

VASHTI WAS RIGHT

Have you ever noticed the inscription over the entrance to Bosworth Hall? It reads, “But of all things truth beareth away the victory.” It’s one of my favorite Oberlin College public statements, and yet, when I researched its origins several years ago I concluded that an opportunity had been missed here. For you see, the full line is, “Women are strongest, but truth beareth away the victory.” The quote is from a book of the Bible that many of you may not even have in your Bibles, since it’s a book of the Apocrypha, a series of books typically not found in “Protestant” Bibles. Within the Apocrypha among things like Maccabees and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon, you will discover the books of Esdras and the line about women and truth comes from 1 Esdras chapter 3. It’s lifted from a fanciful story about a friendly competition among three bodyguards to King Darius who decided to have a contest to state what is the strongest. The winner would be determined by the king and would be showered with gifts and influence. The first says wine is the strongest, the second says the king is strongest, and the third says women are strongest, and then adds, the Bosworth phrase, “But of all things truth beareth away the victory.” It’s all rather humorous with the first bodyguard arguing for the strength of wine:

Then the first, who had spoken of the strength of wine, began and said: ¹⁸“Gentlemen, how is wine the strongest? It leads astray the minds of all who drink it. ¹⁹It makes equal the mind of the king and the orphan, of the slave and the free, of the poor and the rich. ²⁰It turns every thought to feasting and mirth, and forgets all sorrow and debt. ²¹It makes all hearts feel rich, forgets kings and satraps, and makes everyone talk in millions. ²²When people drink they forget to be friendly with friends and kindred, and before long they draw their swords. ²³And when they recover from the wine, they do not remember what they have done. ²⁴Gentlemen, is not wine the strongest, since it forces people to do these things?” When he had said this, he stopped speaking.

Clearly, this man would have understood the need for an anti-saloon league.

¹Then the second, who had spoken of the strength of the king, began to speak:
²“Gentlemen, are not men strongest, who rule over land and sea and all that is in them?
³But the king is stronger; he is their lord and master, and whatever he says to them they obey. ⁴If he tells them to make war on one another, they do it; and if he sends them out against the enemy, they go, and conquer mountains, walls, and towers. ⁵They kill and are killed, and do not disobey the king’s command; if they win the victory, they bring everything to the king—whatever spoil they take and everything else. ⁶Likewise those who do not serve in the army or make war but till the soil; whenever they sow and reap, they bring some to the king; and they compel one another to pay taxes to the king. ⁷And yet he is only one man! If he tells them to kill, they kill; if he tells them to release, they release; ⁸if he tells them to attack, they attack; if he tells them to lay waste, they lay waste; if he tells them to build, they build; ⁹if he tells them to cut down, they cut down; if he tells them to plant, they plant. ¹⁰All his people and his armies obey him. Furthermore, he reclines, he eats and drinks and sleeps, ¹¹but they keep watch around him, and no one may go away to attend to his own affairs, nor do they disobey him. ¹²Gentlemen, why is

not the king the strongest, since he is to be obeyed in this fashion?” And he stopped speaking.

Sounds like a supporter of a stronger executive branch.

¹³Then the third, who had spoken of women and truth (and this was Zerubbabel), began to speak: ¹⁴“Gentlemen, is not the king great, and are not men many, and is not wine strong? Who is it, then, that rules them, or has the mastery over them? Is it not women? ¹⁵Women gave birth to the king and to every people that rules over sea and land. ¹⁶From women they came; and women brought up the very men who plant the vineyards from which comes wine. ¹⁷Women make men’s clothes; they bring men glory; men cannot exist without women. ¹⁸If men gather gold and silver or any other beautiful thing, and then see a woman lovely in appearance and beauty, ¹⁹they let all those things go, and gape at her, and with open mouths stare at her, and all prefer her to gold or silver or any other beautiful thing. ²⁰A man leaves his own father, who brought him up, and his own country, and clings to his wife. ²¹With his wife he ends his days, with no thought of his father or his mother or his country. ²²Therefore you must realize that women rule over you!

“Do you not labor and toil, and bring everything and give it to women? ²³A man takes his sword, and goes out to travel and rob and steal and to sail the sea and rivers; ²⁴he faces lions, and he walks in darkness, and when he steals and robs and plunders, he brings it back to the woman he loves. ²⁵A man loves his wife more than his father or his mother. ²⁶Many men have lost their minds because of women, and have become slaves because of them. ²⁷Many have perished, or stumbled, or sinned because of women. ²⁸And now do you not believe me?

This morning we step into the book of Esther and are shown a couple of strong women. The short passage the lectionary offers provides little context or back story and only the conclusion that the basis for the book’s inclusion in scripture since it offers an explanation for an important Jewish festival: Purim. So, here’s the Cliff’s Notes version. In this story banquets play a big part and the account opens with one. During the banquet, the king calls for queen Vashti to come in all her finery so that he might show her off. Actually, rabbinic tradition holds that the king asked Vashti to come to the party “wearing the royal crown” – and *only* the royal crown. Not wanting to be viewed merely as a sex object, Vashti basically tells him she has a headache and refuses the order. This act of a directly womanly assertion of power greatly upsets the king, his sages and officials since it might get other women in the kingdom thinking and acting similarly. So, after all the men in the court consult with the king it is decided that Queen Vashti will lose her position and furthermore a decree will be sent out across the kingdom that every man should be master in his own house

A replacement is sought and a bunch of women are rounded up as potential candidates for the position. Each is given one year of “cosmetic treatments” before getting the “honor” of spending a night with the king. Esther, an ethnic Jew, is swept up in the round up and placed in the king’s harem. It should be noted that Esther had a cousin, Mordecai, also a Jew who had managed to become a minor official in the king’s court.

Of course, the story also has a villain – that would be Haman, an aspiring high official, who thought quite a lot of himself. Haman was really irked when Mordecai did not show him proper respect. Instead of just disciplining Mordecai, Haman plots to destroy kill all the Jews throughout the entire kingdom to assuage his bruised ego. Meanwhile, Esther finds favor with the king and is chosen to be queen. A plot between Mordecai and Esther unfolds where he encourages her to use her influence with the king to foil Haman. This includes Esther risking her life, for such a time as this. Esther saves the day and everyone, well except Haman and his gang, live happily ever after. And thus, this is the reason why Jews keep the 14th day of the month Adar as a time of celebration called Purim. The whole thing sounds like something straight out of Tales of the Arabian Nights and it's almost surprising there isn't a character named Ali Baba.

But there is more to this story than simply palace intrigue and the justification for a party. Esther offers portrayals of men and women and invites us to consider which provides the better example. In Esther, the men are largely dupes: The King - for all the fear and power ascribed to him, is pretty clueless and not much of a leader, relying on opinion polls for governing. Mordecai - is faithful but relatively ineffective; things largely happen *to* him. Haman - the villain, gets undone by his own arrogance and sense of self-importance. And there are Vashti and Esther. Vashti is presented as strong and forthright but she is quickly exited out of the story. Esther is caught up in circumstances beyond her control but uses her beauty and womanly wiles to get what she wants and needs, and ultimately saves the day.

Feminist scholars tend to prefer Vashti to Esther. But Esther does manage to exploit the power structure of the time. Vashti may exhibit defiance, but that show of power is short-lived. This ancient story may make us laugh but the reality reflected in this story is not all that far from the status of women in our culture today, and that is no laughing matter. A report out just this past June notes that:

While making some gains, white women still make up only about a fifth of all corporate board seats and minority women only 7%. And things don't appear to be changing soon with "more than half of directors newly appointed to board seats last year were white men."

... at the current rate of change, it would take decades for boardrooms to reach representation proportional to the demographics of the American population. Women of color, for example, make up 20 percent of the U.S. population, but it would take until 2046 for them to make up 20 percent of Fortune 100 board seats.

"The fact remains," the authors of the report write, "progress has been painfully slow."

Lying behind these numbers is the continuing pervasiveness of gender stereotyping. A Stanford Graduate School of Business report from this past April titled, "The Language of Gender Bias in Performance Reviews" points out that:

A take-charge attitude at work typically earns men positive performance reviews, but for women, assertiveness only gets them so far. ...

Women in male-dominated professions can't simply "act like men" to get ahead, because doing so elicits a backlash, the researchers found. While exhibiting competence and confidence does not hurt female professionals, openly engaging in confrontations or pursuing positions of power evoke negative reactions from supervisors. These behaviors can lead to critiques designed to get women to fall in line with gender norms, which is known as "gender policing."

But when women indirectly pursue a promotion by having someone higher up in the company advocate on their behalf, their chances of earning top ratings increase. Of course, to benefit from such a situation, women need to have already established relationships with upper-level managers.

Sounds a lot like Vashti and Esther, doesn't it? Such biases not only hold back and harm women, they are also not good for men. In BBC article this past March called, "Why the 'nice guy' penalty disadvantages all workers" research was offered that demonstrated that men are distrusted and passed over at work when they exhibit qualities stereotypically assigned to women.

One male worker stated: "For my entire career, the alpha-male types who make fun of co-workers as a matter of course, goof off but largely deliver, use denigrating terms for women and junior staffers and generally behave in a cocky manner have been advanced more quickly, been recognized more vocally."

A study by Bosak and her colleagues, mainly of Irish HR managers, involved participants reading a fictitious promotion application and quotes from a performance review. Some quotes showed that the applicant displayed concern about others at work ("other-advocating"), while other quotes indicated the applicant's self-interest ("self-advocating"). Both men and women rated the other-advocating male candidate much lower than the self-advocating male candidate, who they considered more competent.

Sadly, as this example suggests, it has traditionally paid off for men to be selfish at work. Indeed, agreeable men earn less money, particularly in the prime earning years. One estimate is that over a lifetime, a very agreeable man will earn about \$270,000 less than average.

It is this very rewarding of aggressive, boorish behavior that fosters an environment where sexual harassment is allowed to exist. The apostle Paul writes in Galatians:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And, the Bible opens with Genesis declaring:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

So, what's to be done about our present state? How can we reclaim a world of gender equality and equity that reflects our very created nature and God's intent?

A 2019 Gillette razor ad, "We Believe: the Best Men Can Be" decried toxic masculinity and challenged men to hold other men accountable. The focus of the ad was about how adhering to some traditional stereotypes of masculinity can be harmful, and called for men to break free and be better. Although well received by many, the ad also experienced considerable backlash. Brad Armstrong, professor of psychology at the United States Naval Academy comments:

The profound defensive reaction from some guys to the ad means there needs to be more thoughtful reflection: Just because an ad states some things are wrong with traditional masculinity doesn't translate into 'all men are bad.'

Armstrong goes on to note:

Rather than think, 'Wow what a powerful moment for us all to play a part in stopping harassment,' research from LeanIn.org shows that many men think women are dangerous. This defensive, black-and-white thinking is a reaction to a change in the rules and power status. While it's not uncommon to react to a threat if that's how you see it, it's time to have deeper conversations about what's really happening here."

While the Gillette ad encourages men to say the right things and to act the right way, it concludes, "But some is not enough, because the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow." Gary Barker President and CEO of Promundo states:

It's time to talk about the kinds of men we want our sons to become. For our daughters, we have promised a new world. We're still about 200 years off from full equality at the current rate of change according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report, but we're making some progress. We've written new scripts for our daughters about strength and leadership, but haven't written scripts for our sons in this new world. One of the reasons for so much anger to the Gillette ad is that many men are confused about what modern manhood is about, and many men don't do well with confusion.... The enemy is inaction. It's not enough to be a man who doesn't harass or bully or objectify. We have to step up and take action."

Our challenge, particularly as people of faith is to model a community where all people, regardless of how they are gendered, are treated as equals. Can we not only imagine but live today as those no longer enmeshed in a battle of the sexes, no longer debating who or what is the strongest, embracing the truth that we were created not for competition but for cooperation, not to clash with but to complement each other? A community where we can truly and fully see God's image in each other. The contest over wine, the king, and women in 1 Esdras concludes with the bodyguard who lifted up the strength of women stating:

³⁸But truth endures and is strong forever, and lives and prevails forever and ever. ³⁹With it there is no partiality or preference, but it does what is righteous instead of anything that

is unrighteous or wicked. Everyone approves its deeds, ⁴⁰and there is nothing unrighteous in its judgment. To it belongs the strength and the kingship (and queenship) and the power and the majesty of all the ages. Blessed be the God of truth!” ⁴¹When he stopped speaking, all the people shouted and said, “Great is truth, and strongest of all!”

When this abiding truth frees us from the self-imposed prisons we have erected around gender then truth will have indeed “beareth away the victory” and that will indeed be something to celebrate.

AMEN.