

“Changing minds”
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by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In 1936, a British movie appeared in theaters titled *The Man Who Changed His Mind*. When I stumbled upon its Wikipedia page, I thought I had landed on a great illustration for today’s sermon—maybe a biopic or something dramatic and heroic.

No, it’s a horror movie. It’s all about a mad scientist who switches people’s brains.

That’s how scared we are of the prospect of changing our minds. We made it into a slasher film about someone stealing our brains.

And it’s not only the idea of our minds being changed that scares us; it’s also the idea of going out on a limb and trying to change someone else’s mind.

Tell someone outside the church about our faith? Debate abortion or gun rights? No thanks!

Yet, this is exactly what Esther is being asked to do, and she’s scared.

As a descendant of the Jews who were attacked and carried into exile by Babylon, she belongs to a vulnerable immigrant and religious minority in the heart of Persia, which has just issued a decree to kill all Jews—to annihilate them, young and old, women and children.

Esther lives in a world, much like our own, that just doesn’t trust people who are different. But right now, that world doesn’t know how different Esther is. It doesn’t know that she’s a Jew. But now she’s being asked to persuade the king to revoke his decree and not kill the Jewish people. And even though she’s the queen, in her mind she’s still an orphan and an outsider, a nobody. The king hasn’t even seen her in a month. And if she approaches him now, and if he finds out who she really is, he might kill her.

What chance does she have of changing his mind?

How often does *anyone* change their mind on hot button issues? I’m going to borrow from the great Ira Glass of *This American Life*, and ask, “Do you know anybody... who firmly was on one side of the issue, and then they read a story in the *New York Times* or they heard something on *Rush Limbaugh*, and now they are firmly on the other side? I’m just going to guess. Probably not, right? In fact, the opposite happens. There’s this thing called the backfire effect. It’s been documented in all kinds of studies. It shows that when we’re confronted with evidence disproving what we believe, generally we just dig in and believe it more.”

We all have the experience of that uncle or that casual friend on Facebook, or at Thanksgiving, who just won't hear anything you have to say on a subject. Maybe we've even been that uncle or friend. And in a political climate of ever deepening polarization and retreat to echo chambers of the likeminded, it is easy to despair of the possibility of people ever coming together, let alone persuading one another.

But there are real problems in this world that need addressing. When we're wrong on something like poverty, or crime, or immigration—or when we're stalled in intractable debate—people suffer, people die.

Esther knows this; she just doubts her ability to make a difference. Before Esther can persuade the king, Mordecai has to persuade her of just how important it is that she try. In a dramatically public and political display of grief, Mordecai and the other Jews tear their clothes, don sackcloth and ashes, and go through the city, wailing. And this gets Esther's attention.

What happens next is nothing newsworthy—just people talking one-on-one, sharing their stories and listening.

When Esther confronts the king, she takes her time, inviting him to banquet after banquet, building up her relationship, reminding the king why he loves her, all before she ever raises the topic.

When she finally makes her petition, she begins with a plea for empathy, asking that her life, and the lives of her people, be spared. The king doesn't yet know whom she's talking about. All he knows is that he wants to protect this person he cares about. Only then does she explain the whole situation and come out as a Jew. The king revokes the decree, punishes its culprit, and issues a new decree, giving Jews the right to assemble and defend themselves.

That's how a vulnerable person's courage, personal story, and smart tactics changed the mind of a king and saved her people.

We can be Esther. In fact, there are Esthers all around us.

In 2008, the Los Angeles LGBT Center decided to assemble hundreds of volunteers to go door to door and do something rare in the political world: they were going to talk with their opponents and see if they could change the minds of people against same-sex marriage.

At first, it wasn't working. The volunteers tried to appeal to people's idealism, to principles of freedom and equality. But that wasn't changing anyone's mind.

So they dumped the script and switched tactics. This time, there would be no telling people how they should think. This time, it would be about listening. Volunteers shared their own personal experiences and asked about the experiences of the people they were interviewing. And when someone said something that seemed emotional and important to them, they asked more questions.

A lot of people changed their minds as a result of these conversations. Some were short-term changes, but many still stood by their change a year later, especially when they had spoken with a volunteer who identified themselves as LGBT.¹

One conversation particularly stood out. A man was standing in his driveway, washing a beautiful, vintage Mustang. The volunteer asked him about the car. It turned out that the car had belonged to the man's wife, who had died 11 years ago. He told the volunteer, "Some people say, 'When my wife died, it broke my heart.' Well, no. It didn't break my heart. It put a hole in it. And it won't heal. My wife's been gone 11 years now. It feels more like 11 days. I've never gotten over my wife."

As they continued talking, the volunteer asked the man if he knew any people who are gay. Ira Glass explains: "And mostly he just stands there as the voter just sort of connects the dots in his own life that he had never bothered to connect before." The volunteer reflected back to the man that marriage is clearly important to him, just by the way he talks about his wife.

That's when it clicked. He said, "I would want these gay people to be happy too. I've got a gay couple across the street there... They're wonderful people... They're happy. Just like I was with my wife."

And then, for the first and only time, the volunteer brought up the issue that took him to this man's house to begin with, saying, "You know, this issue is going to come for vote again in the future." To which the man replied that he'd vote for it this time. The volunteer asked him why that feels right to him. And then came words of personal truth: "I would hope that they would find the happiness that I had with mine... Because I know I had it."

It turns out that what creates real change in others' minds isn't arguing with them; it's just being there with them, listening and sharing stories and finding what they love—what moves them.

This should make sense to us. This concept of "presence" as "persuasion" is at the core of our faith. In order to persuade us, to get us to see the truth about God and ourselves, God even came

¹ The study designed to assess the long term impact of these efforts has been significantly questioned since its publication.

into our midst and was present with us in Jesus Christ. Even God wasn't able to persuade us any other way.

Persuasion starts with the witness of a real person whose presence, whose story, whose value to us, disrupts our existing perceptions and opens us to hear new ideas.

Don't start with the hot topic. Eat a meal together; build a relationship. Find what makes that person feel good, and talk about that. Start by asking questions about what matters to them. Find the truths in what they share. And then reframe the problem, just as that volunteer reframed the issue for the guy with the Mustang so that it wasn't about protecting marriage from those who would corrupt it; it was about sharing with others the same joys of marriage he had once known.

Tell your own story. Make it personal. Just as Mordecai and Esther did, share how this affects you.

God has given each of us, in our life experiences, in our very identities, pieces, fragments, of truth. Like Esther, we have more to say than we realize. Those pieces may save someone's life. And, perhaps, someone else's pieces will save yours. **Amen.**