

Good morning church. Let me ask you a question everywhere right now: who wants this? Who wants to be courageous in your life, right? Like, do you want to be courageous? Silence. Yeah. Okay. Great. Nobody? One person. All right.

No, no, seriously though, think about that. I think we all want to be courageous in our life. And today we're gonna talk about that, and we're gonna get excited about that: being courageous. But before we do that, by a show of hands, how many of you have ever played the game Uno? Yeah, I mean most of us, all of us have played the game.

And as we continue our game on series, I'm gonna invite you open to week four there of Uno as we go through this and look at courage. Now Uno is a fun game, but here's one of the realities about it: it's a game that you can't control the hand that you're dealt. You can't control the hand that you're dealt, but you can control how you play your hand.

And today, we're going to look at the life of Esther, and we're gonna see that while she couldn't control the hand that she was dealt — orphaned, adopted, then sojourner into a foreign land, forced to marry a foreign king — after she was brought into a harem, had a plot to kill her and her cousin Mordecai and all of her people; but what she did control was how she played that hand faithfully.

And today we're going to get an opportunity to look at the hand that we've been dealt, whether that was a hand in the past, whether that's a hand that we're holding now, or a hand that will be dealt later, and how will you and I play that hand courageously as God's called, chosen, redeemed disciples.

So today we're going to look at how we play the hand that we've been dealt: first, refusing to match the color; second, recognizing your wild card moment; third, playing the last card anyway; and doing what we have to do with Uno, call it out loud: "Oh, no!"

All right, so let's dive in as we refuse to match the color. You know how Uno's played: the person before you lays a card, and that card is going to be a color that you then have to play. That's following the crowd. It's something that we're all kind of liking to do; we kind of look and say, what is everyone else doing? How are they doing that? Or what's happening around us?

But what if God courageously is actually calling you to not be like the crowd, to not just be a common person? Actually, the way I like to call it is, be uncommon. I think uncommon is better than being different — like, be uncommon. Don't be like everybody else.

Mordecai was this way in Esther 3:2-4:

"All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor."

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" Day after day they spoke to him. Therefore, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

You see, everyone else was just following the way — all the Jews, everybody that was there in Susa — was just following what had been commanded, doing what they had been told. They were going with the flow. They were part of the crowd. They were being common with the exception of Mordecai, who refused to be common, and he was going to be uncommon because he knew it was not the right way to go.

That's a more difficult thing to do because it's easier for us to just go with the flow, go with what everyone else is doing. It's easier for us not to paint our own target on our back. And actually, this happens a lot of times even from the very early age of our growing up.

I remember in seventh grade, we started middle school. Most of us had made the jump together from elementary school into middle school, and so our class was pretty familiar; but we had a few new kids, and one of the new kids was really different. And then three of the other new kids were kind of — well, they were just bullies at the end of the day, and they would make this different new kid's day after day after day a living heck, whether they were chasing him, whether they were physically punching him, or whether they were emotionally or verbally mocking him.

And the rest of us, due to our own fear, we were just silent. We just were common. We just stood by, and it's a regret that remains in my life.

And when I think about the temptation of Satan in our lives, Satan is always looking to get you and I to be common. It's his greatest ploy to lead us into sin. Think about this, as he is in the garden, and he is leading Eve into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit.

If you look in Genesis chapter 3, look to see where Adam is. I think in our minds, we think, "Oh, he must have been off doing something else, like going and gardening other places or finding new animals to name or something different," right? There that comes back and goes, "What is this you have done?"

But no, actually, that's not true at all. What is Adam doing? He's actually right there looking beside her. He's in the presence. He's in the space. He could have said, "Whoa, whoa, Eve, come on. Wait a minute. Remember what all this said? No, no, no, that's not the way God told it to be."

Instead, what does he do? He just becomes common. "I'm gonna let her do this. I'm gonna let her say this. I'm actually going to be silently agreeing. I'm kind of curious as well."

It's great if Eve and I have peace at the end of this day. In the wilderness, as the Israelites have been rescued, redeemed out of Egypt and freed and Moses is on the mountaintop, out of great fear as they wait for him to return, there's a few that start to say, "He's never coming back. It would have been better if we had stayed. What is going to happen to us? There is no God that really is saving us."

Let us erect a golden calf and worship that; we would be better off. And all the others follow suit.

From David on a rooftop, looking out as the king, as one highly favored who's heard about other kings and all the things that they have as well, and he sees this beautiful Bathsheba. "Let me be common."

But Jesus comes in, and He has the same temptations. Because Satan doesn't know how to try anything new under the sun, because he can't create anything new in any way, so he tries the same old ploys that he gave to Adam and Eve and to Moses, or to the people in the day of Moses, and to David and to everyone else. Says Jesus, "Just be common. Look around, worship me. All this could be yours. Did God really say?" And Jesus becomes uncommon and says, "Here's the Word of God and here's what it says."

Where in your life are you going with the crowd? Where in the hand that you've been dealt are you just doing what everyone has done? Is your marriage miserable? Are you saying, "I should be happier; my counselor says go ahead and get a divorce. Life will be better. The kids are almost out of the house, they'll be fine. They're used to that."

Are you tired of parenting? It's been too hard. It's been too rough. I've done this fight with this many teenagers, the last one, whatever. Just go.

Is the workplace turning into a festering of gossip, of everyone deciding what all the problems are and who the problems are, but no one talking about the problem to the person that can actually solve the problem?

Where are you going with the crowd rather than the Word of God? Rather than saying, "I'm not going to play the same suit. I'm going to play a different card, of a different suit," because that's what God calls you to do.

And then we get an opportunity to be the people of God that recognize our wild card moment. There's nothing better in the game of Uno than knowing that you've got a wild card in your deck. And let me tell you, dear Christian friends, God has given you a wild card to play, and that card will change the transition of the game.

And Esther 4:14 says, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will rise from another place. But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position." Everyone everywhere say, write that down in your notebook: that you have been dealt the cards that you have for such a time as this.

To play the transition card that Esther is in the position she's in right now to do something, to make a transition, to make a change, to right a wrong. For such a time as this is what she's going to lean into and lead out of, and she gets to do that.

Where is your transition moment? I think all of us have times where we can make a change. We don't have to be caught up in the crowd that we're in. There are certain times in life where those transition moments are natural.

I talk to students all the time. I tell them, you know, when you move from middle school to high school or high school to college or college into the workplace, you get to actually redefine yourself. If you start a new job, you get to redefine yourself, you get to do that transition moment.

But truthfully, life is one big transition all the time, and it can happen at any time where we just sit there and go, "Hold on, I'm gonna play a wild card. I'm not gonna keep going the way it's been going. I'm not gonna keep being part of the crowd. I'm gonna change something up."

A few years ago, I was just into my rhythm and my routine of everything that was going on. I was busy with life that was happening with work and my career and all the things that I was doing, and I was finding myself probably more demanding on a child than I should have been — one of my kids.

And I was constantly just demanding further excellence and change and things all that. And finally, it took Laurie a courageous moment to come to me and just say, "Greg, you can keep doing what you're doing, but eventually, at some point, she's not gonna like you. She'll be dear daughter; she'll love you, but she won't want to spend time with you. Or you can make a change. You can begin to find grace, and you can let things go that you don't really need to worry so much about."

And that was a moment where I was able to play my wild card, changed the way I was, the way I was behaving, the way I was living, the way I was giving expectations.

And when we look at Jesus, we see that Jesus changed the trajectory, changed and transitioned the time and transitioned the beliefs of the people all the time. He would always say to them, he'd say, "You have heard it said to you, but I say this," and he would begin to ask the questions, and he would begin to pause it, and he would say, "You have said this, or you have listened to this, or you have learned this, but here's what I say. Here's what I think. Here's where I go."

And he began to invite those that were never invited — the lepers and the blind, the sinners, the women — and he'd invite them to the table. He welcomed them in and he'd transition and change what was always accepted or understood.

He'd asked the question, "Who is the Sabbath made for?" And he opened the kingdom of God from the religious elite and those who were perfectly following what they thought were the hundreds and hundreds of laws to those who are reliant on the grace of God and the forgiveness and the mercy of God.

Where in your life is God calling you today to play your wild card, to transition? Is it to say, "I'm going to change my marriage; I'm going to deal with the down the hand that I have, and I'm going to be courageously leading and love"? Is it parenting? Is it in your workplace of stopping just letting people tell you how you should lead or what you should do, and now instead coming out and saying, "I'm going to speak up"?

Is it turning to the gossip and to the crowd of the gossip and saying, "This is not a conversation I want any part of," and walking away? Is it stopping those who are complaining about something that they think because we always want to say if something's better than us, then we have to tear it down first, and instead just finding the positivity in whatever God is leading us to be at?

Where is your transition moment today?

And as you play that wild card, it then leaves you with that last card that you know — this is the card that's going to win the game. And so often we hold on to this last card.

But what if God is calling you to play the card before it's the last one? To courageously lead that out as he did with Esther in Esther 4:6:

"Go and gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I and my attendants will fast as you do. And when this is done, I will go to the king."

Even though it is against the law, and everyone everywhere, "If I die, I die. I'm willing to give my life for this. I'm willing to do this. I'm not going to just do what someone else has told me is right. I'm going to do the right thing, and if I die, I die."

Early into my ministry as a senior pastor, about three years in, I knew how to manage people, to tell them to do the right things or to do what is right. I was able to say, "Here's what's right, here's all the policies, here's all the things we should do — do all the right things."

And I had a guy that I was on our team that just was struggling. He was doing great for a while, and then all of a sudden, he just wasn't. And he wasn't, and he wasn't.

We tried encouragement; we tried all these things; and then we tried this business thing that they called, at that time, a PIP — a performance improvement plan — and we put that in. And then it just got to where it wasn't clicking, it felt like.

And so I did what I thought a good leader would do, because I had all these people coming to me going, "This just isn't working. It isn't working. I don't know why he's like that. I don't know why he's the right one in this red spot. He's not doing the job; he's not doing things right."

So I called him into my office and I told him, effective at the end of that day, in about an hour, that he was no longer an employee. And two weeks later, he went into the hospital, and a week later he died.

And what I found out is he had been dealing with a severe lung disease, and that the reason why he was out of energy, showing up late, leaving early, not able to focus on things was because he could barely breathe.

Now if I really understood what true leadership was — not being a manager, but true leadership — I would have begun with asking him questions, saying, "What's going on? This seems out of character. This isn't who you started to be. What's happening?" And I would have learned something that would have allowed me to then give grace and empathy and care and concern and find solutions.

See, managers make sure people do things right, but true leaders do the right things. And I believe that God has called every single one of us to be courageous leaders.

I believe today that you have been called to be a courageous leader, which means to do the right things. And that is what Jesus does. As he looks around, and he continues to say, "I'm going to lead you to the right path." Continues to say, "I'm going to lead you to do the right things."

From the woman at the well, when he asks the question, "Can I have a drink of water?" leading her then to do the right things, to the woman caught in adultery, when he looks up and says, "He who is without sin, please cast the first stone," and they all go away.

And he looks at her and says, "Where are they?"

To the disciples who say the right thing, "God, is that all these 5,000 people are hungry? Send them away. Let them go eat," to which then he says, "You give them something to eat." Do the right thing, not just what is right, to which they find a boy with five loaves and two fish, and they feed in abundance with twelve basketfuls left over.

Where is God calling you today or in the hand that you've been dealt or when you have that hand to think about: will I do what is right, or am I going to do the right thing?

So you see, doing things right sure gets the job done, but doing the right things gets people one-to-the-kingdom.

And so where is it in your marriage and your parenting and your job? Are you standing up for the little one? Are you defending that marriage and that vow that you stood in front of God himself and said, through all things, good and bad, sickness and health, richer or poorer — please, not poorer, God, but whatever?

Are you there? Are you standing with that child who maybe is not making the decision you want, but you're still loving them enough to courageously tell them that there's a better way to live?

Are you standing with that friend who, if you love them truly like a friend, you're willing to speak truth to them, even if it's hard, even if it may cost you the friendship?

See, Esther said, "If I perish, I perish." Esther said, "If I perish, I perish." What are we willing to courageously step out in?

And lastly, you know this in the game of Uno, when we're down to the last one, we call it out loud: Uno, for the whole table to hear. And we play the card, and we win.

Esther calls it out loud in Esther 7:3-4: "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life, for this is my petition, and everyone everywhere, this is my request, for I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

She comes out, and she lays it all on the line in front of the king. She boldly calls it out loud and says, "Lord, I would not speak, but I'm going to speak, because there is people's lives on the line here."

And she's going to call out what her whole purpose is, which is to bring the ransom and redemption of her people to save them as a leader, calling out what God has called in her to do.

Just like Jesus, a foreshadowing, as he stood at the tomb of Lazarus and said, "Lazarus, come out," and he calls out at the risk of his life, because if you read after that, they then began to plot to kill him.

It was that moment that they said, "He can live no more."

To the thief on the cross, who was going along with the crowd of the other thief and the mockery that was happening and finally had enough and said, "Will you be quiet? What has this man done to deserve being up here with us? We should be here. He has not deserved anything to be here."

To which then he looks at Jesus and he just says, "Will you remember me in your kingdom?"

We know nothing else about his faith journey, about his background, but he has to be remembered, to which he hears as he calls that out, he hears today, "You will be with me in paradise."

And he calls out to Jesus.

[The last lines are repeated "to Jesus" multiple times, emphasizing the calling out.]