

Beheading of John the Baptist
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 12, 2009
Mark 6:14-29

Today's Gospel reading seems more like an episode from a soap opera than a passage from scripture. I mean really. Herodias had been married to Herod's brother Philip, but while he was still living, she divorced him and married Herod who had also divorced his wife. Something that was simply not done at that time. When John the Baptist suggested that Herodias and Herod's marriage was unlawful, Herod had him arrested and put in prison. Herodias wanted John killed for the things he had said, but Herod kept him around. He knew John was a holy and righteous man, and he was quite plainly afraid to kill him. He even liked listening to John, although he was perplexed by the things that John said.

Then, Herod has a big ole birthday party with all his courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee in attendance. You can imagine the feasting and drinking, the rich food and wine. His daughter (some sources say stepdaughter, but in Mark's gospel it's his daughter) comes in and dances, and everyone is pleased, especially Herod, who promises to give her whatever she wants, up to one half of his kingdom. So she skips out to her mother who tells her to ask for John the baptizer's head. Herod is at an impasse. He doesn't want to have John killed, but he made this promise to his daughter in front of all these people. Couldn't go back on his word, even though he knew it was wrong. He has a soldier kill John and bring his head to his daughter on a platter. She gives it to her mother.

Ick. Talk about a dysfunctional family. Is it any wonder that when Herod heard the stories about the miracles of Jesus and his disciples he thought John the Baptist had returned from the dead? He must have been haunted by his actions, knowing that he had had a man killed for no more reason than speaking the truth.

It's a shocking story. A gruesome story. An alarming story. It doesn't seem to have much good news. The vengeful wife of a cowardly, corrupt man with power wins. The prophet who speaks truth to that power loses his life. The same thing happened to Jesus not very long afterwards. Jesus spoke truth to the authorities, and it got him crucified. In some ways we've gotten used to the story about Jesus. As horrific as the crucifixion was, we're almost desensitized to it, and we also know that it leads to the resurrection. But this story of the death of John the Baptist... there doesn't seem to be any redemption in it.

It's hard to look at this story. Many people I talked to this week recommended that I preach on one of the other lessons. But I feel like there's something to be learned from this passage, even if it is difficult to hear and makes for a better lurid play or opera than it does a Sunday morning Bible lesson.

Sometimes when a scripture passage challenges us, it helps to look at its location in the context of the gospel it's in. This story is sandwiched in between Jesus sending the disciples two by two to heal and cast out demons and the feeding of the five thousand with loaves of bread and fish. We see

the contrast between the kind of power that Herod holds, worldly power, and the power of Jesus.

Jesus sends his followers out to heal and minister to the sick. Herod sends his followers out to arrest and later kill those who speak the truth.

Herod holds a decadent banquet for the elite of Galilee that ends with a prophet's head on a platter and a stomach full of the bile of unrighteous deeds. Jesus holds a banquet for crowds of broken and needy people that ends with five thousand people filled with the wholesome food of bread and fish and the righteousness of Jesus' teaching.

Herod could have chosen to listen to John, to amend his ways, and to use his power for good. He could have protected John, not by imprisoning him, but by allowing him to go on preaching and baptizing. Instead he made poor choices in his personal life and then took the coward's way out by giving in to his vicious and vengeful wife. He may have had an earthly kingdom, but he used his power foolishly and has been remembered throughout history as a weak and corrupt man. John and Jesus chose instead the kingdom of God, preaching it, teaching it, living it, and then dying for it.

I think the reason why I've struggled with this story all week is because I want the Good News to be happy news. I want to come to church on Sunday morning and preach a word that says everything's gonna be all right. I want to find some way to give John the Baptist's story a happy ending. But the world doesn't work that way and neither does the Bible. Jesus said, "Take

up your cross and follow me.” Although John didn’t actually hear Jesus say those words, he took up his cross by speaking the truth. It cost him his life.

Following Jesus doesn’t always require death, certainly not death by beheading at the hands of a corrupt ruler. But it does require risk, and it can be dangerous. The outcome is not always happy. If we were to go and lobby for the laws to be changed so that homeless people could have shelter in the Williamsburg area, then we might risk the good will of our neighbors. We would have to learn how to work through the legislative process, how to organize our community, how to stand up for the rights of the poorest among us, and how to persevere through the onslaught of opposition against us. We would have to tell the truth to those who would say that we have no homeless people. We would have to be willing to risk not our lives, but possibly our reputations. We would have to be willing to risk offending someone. Like John. Like Jesus.

The story we heard today is easy to ignore. We don’t want to hear it because it’s gory and depressing and has a terrible ending. We don’t want to hear it because we don’t want to face the fact that following Jesus requires risk and suffering. We don’t want to hear it because speaking truth to power is hard and demanding and inconvenient as well as dangerous. We don’t want to hear it because it’s an ugly story and the hero dies. We don’t want to hear it because the good news is hard news. But there is good news in it underneath all the soap opera drama.

An article in *The Christian Century* by Daniel Harrell sums it up well: “To be serious about following Christ means suffering for Christ. The more serious we become about being salt and light in the world, the more devoted we will become to mission and justice, the more concerned for the least and the lost, the more stubborn about forgiving those who don't want our forgiveness, the more determined about exposing the works of darkness—and the more we will suffer. And yet, ironically, if ever we've suffered in this way for the sake of Christ, then we know the power of weakness, that spiritual force and joy of obedience that energizes us to endure the suffering with grace.”¹

We can choose to use our power like Herod or we can choose the way of Jesus. What will we choose?

¹ Daniel Harrell, “Power Source,” in *The Christian Century*, June 27, 2006: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=2162>.