

July 15, 2018

Eight Sunday after Pentecost

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You may know that our congregation and thousands of others across the world use something called the *Revised Common Lectionary*. It was developed by an international and ecumenical committee of scholars sometime in the early 1980s. They tested it out for nine years and then in 1994 released it to the general public. It is a calendar that tells us which lessons should be read and when. It has a three year cycle and is used by most of the mainline Protestant congregations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. This means that in any given church, on any given Sunday, they are very likely reading the same Bible passages that we are reading.

I have often wondered who exactly serves on the committee and how the committee was selected, but I have had no luck learning more about them. I'm sure that for the most part they knew what they were doing, but every so often, I am stumped. This is one of those Sundays. Why on earth did they choose to include this portion of Mark's gospel? They skipped a lot of other stuff. Why include this particular story? It's gruesome and ugly. Jesus really isn't *in* the story, so what's its function? Why read it?

When I was in seminary, one of my professors said that if a story seemed odd or unusual it was because either there was some deep symbolism involved or it just plain happened that way. Mark may have told this story, simply because that's what happened. From the perspective of the storyteller, it provides an interlude in the narrative. If you remember from last week, Jesus had sent out his twelve disciples to preach and minister around the countryside and so while he's waiting for them to come back at the end of chapter 6, Mark says, this is what was happening at the King's Palace.

The story also answers the question of "Whatever happened to John?" In the first chapter of Mark, he tells about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness and then he says "Now after John was arrested...he went to Galilee," but he never says what happened to John. We're left hanging until Chapter 6 when we find out the rest of John's story.

The beheading of John creates a certain anticipation for first time readers because if a prophet like John gets arrested and beheaded, what can we expect to happen to Jesus? This story gives us some clues as to Herod's feelings about Jesus in that he suspects that he's the resurrected John the Baptist. The question of Jesus' identity will come up later and the same possibilities will be named. Is he John or Elijah or a prophet, and Peter will confess that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the chosen one of God.

Finally, this story gives us a chance to compare John's disciples with the twelve who were chosen by Jesus. At the end of our text today, John's disciples claim his body and provide for a proper burial. It couldn't have been an easy thing to do. There had to have been risks involved with saying you were a friend and a follower of John's. When you compare them with the behavior of the twelve, it's an interesting contrast. Mark reports that Jesus' disciples hid out of fear. It is only the women who come to the cross. The disciples are nowhere to be seen and when Jesus is dead, it is an outsider, Joseph of Arimathea who asks for the body and makes the arrangements. At the end of Mark's gospel, when the women learn that Jesus is risen from the dead, they run from the tomb not so they can share the good news. They leave in fear and tell nothing to anyone.

All of those little bits and pieces can give us an idea of why Mark included this story, but they are no help in figuring out why the Lectionary Committee chose to add this into the mix. Who would want to possibly preach on the beheading of John the Baptist? That's the question that preachers everywhere have been asking themselves this week. It's a creepy little story and yet it is one of the longest anecdotes that Mark gives us in his gospel. He spends a lot of time on this story, so there must be some value in it. What can we take away from it? Perhaps it's the idea that telling the truth has consequences. John the Baptist told the truth. Unwavering, rudely, loudly – he told the truth and he told it not just to the people who came to see him at the River Jordan. He bravely told the truth to everyone and about everyone. He was unceasing in preaching the truth that sinful people should repent of their sins. His sermons weren't just for the average Israelite. John made a point of calling out the King and his queen as well.

You see, when Herod was a younger man he had married Phaseis, the daughter of a neighboring king, but a few years later, while he was on vacation, visiting his brother in Rome, he fell in love with his sister-in-law Herodias. They were madly in love and the fact that they were both married to someone else wasn't about to stop them. And they began making plans to get married. Of course Phaseis, the first wife, found about their plans. She went home to her daddy who promptly declared war on Herod.

Her departure, simplified things for Herod when it came to getting a divorce, but it was a little trickier for Herodias. It isn't clear if she got divorced before her husband was killed or if she even got divorced at all. It's also not clear if the wedding was held before or after she was legally available. However the marriage came to be, John was very vocal in his criticism of the whole matter.

One detail that Mark leaves out is that Herodias was not just Herod's sister-in-law, she was also his niece. The marriage was incestuous PLUS Jewish law stated that a man should care for the wife of his deceased brother but he wasn't supposed to marry her. The whole matter was just plain wrong.

For Herod, John's denouncement wasn't just embarrassing and it wasn't just an issue of religious fidelity. It was a political problem. If people agreed with John, they might overthrow his rule. Herod's grip on his kingdom was always at risk from neighboring kings and queens and governors, and of course the Romans could have removed him with very little effort. An angry populace ready to rebel was something Herod did not need.

Herodias on the other hand was just plain angry. John had publicly condemned her and she was not one to forgive and forget, so when she had the opportunity, she made certain that John's preaching would come to an end. He would have no more chances to make her life miserable.

John had to have known that something like this could happen and yet he was uncompromising in speaking the word that God had given to him. He must have understood that condemning the king and queen as sinful was going to have serious consequences, and yet, he didn't hesitate. He didn't make allusions or allegories. He said what he felt called to say without any hesitation. He flat out spoke the truth, **every single time.**

Whether we like it or not, God calls us to the same kind of commitment. John isn't just a superstar from the New Testament. He's a role model. With us, with those who follow Jesus, it's supposed to be all or nothing. We are called to put aside our fears and speak the truth when and where it needs to be spoken, even if there are consequences.

And there will be consequences. The opportunities to speak the truth come every day- in ways big and small.

A sales person makes an offhand comment about God being good. Do you take up the thread and let them know that you believe in God. Or do you let the moment pass you by? You're never going to see them again, what does it matter if you tell them the truth about who you are and what you believe?

Someone at work makes a joke but it isn't funny because it's sexist or racist or exclusive in some other way. What do you say? Do you say anything? Or do you ask, "Did you just say this?" or "Do you really think that's funny?" Do you speak the truth fully and tell them what they've said is wrong? What would Jesus do? What would John do?

Or maybe your kid comes home and you finally manage to get her to tell you why she's been so grouchy lately. You know she's upset about something. She finally tells you about this girl who is bullying other kids at school. Your daughter hasn't been the target but she's still upset. What should she do. Should she challenge the bully in some way? Should she tell the teacher or another adult? The odds are good that if she gets involved, she'll be the bully's next target. It's so much safer to be the quiet audience. What do you do? What's the truth to be spoken in that moment? How do we help our children to be brave even when the odds are against them?

In the 1970s, there was a boycott against the Nestle company and all its various holdings. It included food products as well as hotels and restaurants. The boycott was based on policies that Nestle had for advertising and promoting infant formula to poor women in countries in Africa. The formula was promoted as being the best thing mothers could give their children. Women with newborns would be given free formula at medical clinics, but the instructions for mixing the formula weren't given in their native language. Women would use unclean water or would mix the formula in the wrong proportions. The formula cost more than the women could afford but by the time they realized the financial problem, their milk would be gone and they couldn't go back to breast feeding. Children were sick, malnourished and dying. The boycott called for Nestle to change its policies.

For several years my sisters and I didn't eat Nestle chocolate and I loved Crunch bars. One day my sister Lisa was at her monthly orthodontic appointment and when the orthodontist asked her what she'd been doing at school, she started to tell him about a paper she was writing about the Nestle boycott.

He quickly dismissed the whole thing as being unrealistic and silly. *She was just one person. How could her giving up Nestle Quick and candy bars make a difference?* And my 13 year old sister bravely said, "It makes a difference to me."

Lisa knew that even if nobody else ever knew what she was doing, even if her actions meant nothing to the people in charge, even if mothers and children thousands of miles away never heard about people like her- being a part of that boycott made a difference to her.

Hundreds and thousands of people told the truth about what was happening and eventually Nestle changed its marketing practices. As Christians we are called to proclaim the gospel in words and in deeds even when it might not be easy. Even when it's scary. Maybe especially when it's scary.

We're called to act out the truth of the gospel even if it doesn't seem like it could amount to anything. Even if it seems like it can't possibly make a difference – we are called to work for justice, in whatever way we can.

The good news is that Jesus answered the same calling that we follow. He spoke the truth again and again and of course, there were consequences, but the punishment that Christ took on, he took on for our sake. Because Jesus was willing to face those consequences, our sins have been forgiven and that is the ultimate truth and consequence. Our speaking and acting out the gospel may cause us problems but the good news is that God is on our side and the suffering we endure for the sake of the gospel is not without merit.

One of the curious little details about today's gospel is only a word. Mark observes in verse 20 that Herod was "perplexed" by John. He liked to listen to John, he enjoyed the Baptizer's sermons. He liked his style and his rhetoric, but he didn't know what to make of him. Herod's confusion continues when his daughter asks for John's head. What was it about her that befuddled him much so that he was willing to make such a grand promise? The whole thing just doesn't sound right. Not the dance, not the promise, none of it makes sense.

Herod became even more perplexed when he had to choose whether to keep his word or not. He wanted to protect John, but he had made a public oath and what kind of king breaks a promise like that?

The text says that Herod was "grieved" but it's hard to see him as the sympathetic character in this story. Mark says that the king believed John to be a righteous and holy man, but for the sake of his reputation, he had John beheaded. And the head is served up on a plate.

What might have happened if Herod had made different choices? What if he had listened to John? Or to Jesus? What if he had repented? What if he had asked for forgiveness instead of making one stupid choice after another? What if he had chosen to speak the truth about himself? About his actions? About his faith or lack of it?

It would have been hard. Unbelievably hard and risky. There would have been tremendous consequences for him and for his kingdom, but that doesn't mean it isn't doable.

Three years ago, David Lose wrote about the importance of talking about difficult things that were happening in our country at the time. As I read his words this week, it struck me that it doesn't really matter what David was talking about. The truth of it all is still the same.

He wrote "Yes, it's hard. Really hard. Which is why we in the church can't simply sit back and say nothing, hoping it will all go away. It won't. Moreover, if we keep saying nothing about things that shape the world our kids are growing up in, they will eventually believe the faith has nothing to say to them.

Trust me, I know that conversations – even conversations that seek understanding rather than immediate resolution – can be difficult. But they are possible, even crucial. And we have something to offer – hope, mutual respect, and the love we know in Christ.

There is hope here. God is at work in us. Calling us to be people who proclaim the truth. The truth that God is always with us. The truth that all people have worth. The truth that goodness is stronger than evil and life is stronger than death. The truth that God never gives up on us or the things that we might do even if we are afraid or silent or still. The truth that our lives are different because of Jesus' love and forgiveness.