

Was it worth the price?

Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

After hearing the Gospel passage from Mark, I'm sure some of you might wonder why. Why would we include this story, of the beheading of John the Baptist? There is a three-year lectionary that many Christian churches follow as we do, which lays out different scriptures each Sunday over three years, taking different parts of the Bible into account. And there are advantages and disadvantages to using a lectionary. One thing is that it doesn't allow the preacher to simply pick the same scriptures over and over again giving you the same message. It also doesn't allow the preacher to simply seek out scriptures that will prove whatever point they are trying to make. More importantly, what a lectionary does is allows the Holy Spirit to speak. To be at work. It turns the focus to God and away from one person's human desires, or ego.

Like a lot of things in life, our greatest learnings come from challenging times and challenging people. And for me personally today, the Gospel is the challenge. It truly is a discipline to open one's heart, and to be willing to see and hear what is being offered even when it makes us uncomfortable. It leads to the question that has been floating through my head for several months now, a question that Sally asked all of us: *by whose authority do we live?*

The story of Herod and John the Baptizer explores the theme of conflict and rejection. This passage has been used as the basis of many plays and musicals and operas throughout human history. It's like a Greek tragedy or a play by Shakespeare. Now if we look at the salacious details of this particular story, we have a royal divorce involving a king marrying his brother's wife, we have a queen's wrath, a king's birthday banquet, a dancing girl, and a rash royal promise which ends with the head of John the Baptizer delivered to the banquet on a platter.¹ All of this leads Herod to wonder if John the Baptizer might be in Jesus. Is Jesus now John the Baptizer raised from the dead? Herod's left to wonder and worry over the possibilities that Jesus is going to be John all over again. Before the beheading, John was in prison because he was very critical of Herod marrying his brother's wife. And it was John's criticism that made the queen very angry. So angry that she wanted

¹ Marcus Borg, *Conversations with the Scripture; The Gospel of Mark*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), p. 57-58.

him killed. Some consider Herod a weak man. But a more pastoral approach would be to consider, as Karen Mari Yust suggests:

“the personal and social dilemmas in which Herod finds himself in this passage, he is trying to negotiate a myriad of complicated relationships within his household and society, and discovering that it is quite difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold his own personal standards...Herod wants to be seen as a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilee and society. He is troubled by his daughter’s request for the execution.”²

Herod is caught. And in the end he makes a choice that leaves him deeply grieved. That was the line that stuck out for me: “he was deeply grieved.” For it says in the scripture that Herod liked, although he found John perplexing, he liked hearing what John had to say. And in fact, Herod feared John because he knew that John was a holy man. Herod didn’t always understand what John was saying, but in his heart and in his soul, he knew that John’s words were coming not from himself, but from God.

So what does this story have to say to us today? Like I said, I appreciated what Karen Mari Yust identified in the commentary that I was reading this week. She went on to say:

“Perhaps this is how human beings deal with our inclination to prefer social stability and equilibrium over the messy, chaotic process of personal and social transformation that participating in a spiritual quest requires. We look for second chances, and hope that we are ready to risk more of ourselves this time around. If not, we may find ourselves like Herod, deeply grieved.”³

There is good news in all of this. There’s good news found in Ephesians, which helps us to understand the Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, the story of Herod, as an affirmation of God’s grace. We sometimes need to be reminded that “the perspective of the Gospel is not first about human beings, but about God, and what God has done in Jesus Christ.”⁴ We need to hear the holy gifts and treasures that are found in the passage of Ephesians that say: “God blessed us in Christ. God chose us in Christ. We are destined for adoption through Christ and it is in Christ that we obtain our inheritance and our hope is set on Christ. What would have happened had Herod had lived his life according to the authority of God, rather than trying to please his people or society? What would have been the soulful response to Herod’s daughter’s request, which was really his wife’s request done out of vengeance? What would Herodias request had she lived according to God’s promise of love and

² Karen Mari Yust, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p 236.

³ _____, p. 240.

⁴ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 230.

acceptance? Would she have chosen differently? The Gospel this week is unsettling, because we too have witnessed and experienced and made our own choices that were done to appease others and to meet other's needs. But the Gospel reveals that which is often hidden from plain sight. It leads us to wonder under whose sovereignty we live, by whose authority do we live. And what is our social responsibility in this time and space?

The hymn that we're gonna be singing next is entitled "To Us All, To Every Nation", and is one that was quoted by Martin Luther King in his speech in 1966 entitled "We Shall Overcome". When Sally, Erin and I were exploring hymns for this Sunday, this hymn popped out. There were a couple verses and phrases in it that at first made some of us uncomfortable, but as we pondered and tried to unpack these words, we heard truth, we felt hope and knew that we had to sing it. The first line of the second verse says, "Then to side with truth is noble when we share its wretched crust." Then to side with truth is noble when we share its wretched crust. Truth is not easy; making the choice that benefits the common good is not always easy. The hymn goes on to name that it is the brave one who chooses to continue to stand even in the wretched crust. And in the third verse it says, "with the cross that stands not back, in the occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth. They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." We are being called to walk through life together. Where we learn, where there's space to learn, to change, to grow. For example, we realized the earth was not flat, but was round. We've also come to see that some of our past assumptions have hurt people and it is time to learn a new way. We realize now how much conversation and listening to all faith traditions has helped us to understand that all faith traditions have a common goal: love, peace, and harmony. It's not our place to convince another faith that we are right and they are wrong. We're called to learn from each other and move forward in this world together. For we are human. We *will* make mistakes, we do make mistakes, and God loves us and forgives us. God's grace is spoken of in Ephesians, proclaims that God's grace is not a response on God's part to what humans have done, but that which precedes faith and his source. In this challenging reading this week, the Spirit calls us to turn to God; to live according to God's will and not our own. This is messy. It's challenging, *and* it can bring healing and harmony to the world in a time of brokenness.

This is very unusual for me, but I wanted to end with some ancient wisdom from two major juggernaut theologies, Calvin and Barth, who said:

"Those who look at themselves and find what is in their own hearts and souls cannot help but be discouraged. If, however, they look not at themselves but at Christ, and if

they see in Christ the grace and mercy of God, they should find assurance they are included in the promises of God's grace and mercy."⁵

May this promise and assurance of God's grace and mercy help us to work and walk towards right relation. May God's mercy help us to be merciful to others, and may God's grace open our hearts and turn our attention to others. Open to seeing the gifts that each person offers and shares. May God's grace give us space to forgive one another and ourselves and live in hope each and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ _____, p. 232.