

## “The Cost and The Glory”

Mark 6:14-29

July 11, 2021

This is a sermon about conscience. Conscience is important in your life, and in the life of the world. Conscience is a powerful force for good, but it comes with a price.

Mark’s story of the execution of John the Baptist is ugly, full of corruption, hatred, and cowardly indulgence. It is very descriptive of the brutality of the Roman Empire. But it reminds us of the choice we all face in some form: shall we conform to and live by the standards of this world, or shall we seek and live on a higher ground?

John spoke truth to power when he called out the illegality of the marriage of King Herod Antipas. It was a public stand of moral conscience, which is the work of the prophet. Herod had him imprisoned for this. Paradoxically, because he knew that John was a righteous and holy man he protected him from the murderous impulse of his wife, Herodias. Though he was puzzled by John, Herod liked to listen to him. I take that as an indication that something was going on in his mind and heart. Was it possible that John was giving spiritual direction to the king, and possibly converting him?

Then came the tragic night of the party, when things got out of control.

What happened was the failure of conscience on the part of the King. He chose to appease his wife and not lose face with his party guests. He chose preservation of his political power over the spiritual power of truth and honor. Herod is forever remembered for this cold and heartless moment. Making this choice always leads to darkness.

This tragic story gets played out in the lives of ordinary people, albeit on a much less dramatic scale. All of us to some extent are King Herod. Every day we are faced with the choice of satisfying selfish ambitions and needs or listening to the deep and more challenging call to righteous and holy life. John the Baptist represents that voice that reminds and urges us to do the better thing in the face of influences that push us to the easy, the convenient, or the expedient.

I define *conscience* as having a center of gravity for your life that is higher than mere self-interest. Conscience is more than being a good person and making good personal choices; it means that you believe there is a moral, ethical, and spiritual order that has to be respected for your well-being and that of the world. Conscience is a direct consequence of Christian discipleship, and it comes with a cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who himself was executed in 1945 because of his opposition to the regime of Adolf Hitler. His book *The Cost Of Discipleship* is a classic work of Christian devotion, and contains these words:

*“When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die”*

The cost of discipleship is death. There are rare cases where that is literally true. We call them martyrs, a Greek word that translated means "witness." For the vast majority of us, however, this death is to ego and self-interest as the guiding principles of life. We are called to die for Christ in the symbolic and ritual laying down of our lives in worship and in service to others. That ritual death means that conscience is center that guides and directs us. When conscience motivates the followers of Christ, the world is affected.

Bonhoeffer lamented what he called "cheap grace." Cheap grace is forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession. It is grace without committed following, grace without the cross. Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes as a word of forgiveness to the contrite heart. It compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him.

The cost of that decision is high because the life of Christ by definition pushes back against the power exemplified by Herod. But since, as Martin Luther said, it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience, the value is higher than the cost. The exchange of your life is for the life of Christ, who says, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

I wish Christianity was simply about being a good person and having a good life. Most of us treat it that way and get uneasy or even angry when it appears to demand something of us. Followers of Jesus will inevitably face some of the same conflicts that he did. When we experience tension with this world because of our faith, then we have understood the call to discipleship.

Jesus memorialized John with the words "among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist." He went on to say that as great as John was even the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. That is you and me. We are called not to great achievements; we are called to live out our lives with conscience. Our chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. The cost of our exercise of conscience is high, but the glory given to God and our enjoyment of God's presence, is far greater.