

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

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Pentecost 7

Mark 6:14-29

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Herod the king heard about these things, because the name of Jesus had become well-known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this is why miraculous powers are at work through him.” Others were saying, “He is Elijah.” Still others were saying, “He is a prophet like one of the ancient prophets.” But when Herod heard these rumors, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised to life.”

He said this because Herod himself had arranged to have John arrested and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod’s brother Philip. Herod had married her, but John told Herod, “It’s against the law for you to marry your brother’s wife!” So, Herodias had it in for John. She wanted to kill him, but she couldn’t. This was because Herod respected John. He regarded him as a righteous and holy person, so he protected him. John’s words greatly confused Herod, yet he enjoyed listening to him.

Finally, the time was right. It was on one of Herod’s birthdays, when he had prepared a feast for his high-ranking officials and military officers and Galilee’s leading residents. Herod’s daughter Herodias came in and danced, thrilling Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the young woman, “Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.” Then he swore to her, “Whatever you ask I will give to you, even as much as half of my kingdom.”

She left the banquet hall and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?”
“John the Baptist’s head,” Herodias replied.

Hurrying back to the ruler, she made her request: “I want you to give me John the Baptist’s head on a plate, right this minute.” Although the king was upset, because of his solemn pledge

and his guests, he didn't want to refuse her. So he ordered a guard to bring John's head. The guard went to the prison, cut off John's head, brought his head on a plate, and gave it to the young woman, and she gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard what had happened, they came and took his dead body and laid it in a tomb.¹

Torah-defying decisions. Confrontation. Grudges. Admiration. An arrest. A questionable birthday party (even before you start to read between those scriptural lines). And ultimately the beheading of John the Baptist.

Needless to say—that there is A LOT going on in today's gospel reading; a seemingly odd text perched precariously between the sending of the disciples...and their eventual return just in time for the feeding of the 5,000.

The good news—is that you're certainly not alone if the gruesome details of today's text have left you scratching your head—baffled as to their meaning. After all—even Matthew and Luke (the first to grapple with these words) struggled themselves. Matthew's gospel shortens this account into little more than a footnote—and Luke's gospel omits it altogether. Maybe we should heed their advice!

But Mark (on the other hand)—usually known for his brevity and immediacy—oddly chooses to luxuriate over the grim details surrounding John's death for sixteen bleak verses.

Add to that the reality that this is the only story Mark tells in which Jesus doesn't make an appearance...it is, for literary purposes, a strange sort of flashback...and (to put it bluntly) it just doesn't fit.

I think that we are justified in our bafflement...our confusion...and our feelings of disorientation this morning.

BUT, and to paraphrase theologian Emerson Powery²—when we relegate these odd verses to nothing more than an interlude we'd prefer to sweep under the rug...we actually deprive ourselves of the rich opportunity to explore just how intimately the manner of John's death is tied to Jesus' mission—(and to go one step further) how intimately it is tied to the broader mission of God's church!

Wise advice!

¹ Common English Bible

² Powery, Emmerson. Commentary on Mark 6:14-29. Working Preacher. Available [HERE](#)

And so what do we do, then, with this Torah-defying...confrontational...grudge-filled...arresting ...and gruesome story? What do we do with this portion of scripture which leaves us feeling quite unsettled? What do we do if, instead of sweeping this precariously perched text under the proverbial rug, we choose to dive deeply into the depths of its purpose?

Well—it's going to involve some truth-telling. In fact, as David Lose³ cautions: if we're truly going to dwell with this text, we're going to need to tell the truth...not once...but twice.

The first truth—is the reality that the kingdom Jesus preached, and the kingdom to which we have also been called to proclaim in our own time—doesn't fit neatly into a world whose cultural presumptions set wealth...status...power...and fame over and above the work of justice...mercy...love...and grace. As hard as it may be to read these sixteen verses of Mark's gospel—we need this story...because this story, is a part of our story. We know—ever more profoundly—that not only did Jesus meet with political obstacles...but so did his followers, and so did (and will) his radical message in a world so penchant for the status quo.

Or...and to put it another way...the gospel is transformational! But seldom does such transformation come easy.

And that brings us to the second truth with which we need to dwell this Sunday—the profound promise that God's story doesn't end with the gruesome demise of a beloved prophet. True, that in the story of John's beheading...we are confronted with the realities of a counter-cultural gospel in a status-quo world: **but it's not the whole story.**

In fact...maybe that's why Mark tucked it so oddly mid-way through his sixth chapter—to remind us that God's story doesn't end here!!! Far from it!!

Jesus came:

...to make possible more than just the pursuit of wealth, power and fame;

...to announce a different way of being...and a different way of loving...and a different way of living in God's world;

...to proclaim the assurance of a God who knows our pains...and the assurance of a God who has felt our pains;

Jesus came to show us that there is something more...more than heartache...more than power ...more than struggle...more than division.

Jesus came to show us life—and life abundantly!

³ Lose, David. Commentary on Mark 6:14-29. In The Meantime. Available [HERE](#)

You know, it occurs to me that the sixteen verses with which we have dwelt today...they are not meant to scare us. Not at all! I wonder, if perhaps, they may be meant to free us—free us to know that even in the face of all that seems simply insurmountable...that even then God has written us into a story the likes of which we never could have imagined. A story bigger...and a story more beautiful...than we could ever comprehend.

And so let me ask you a question: how do these two truths manifest in your life? Better yet, how do these truths manifest themselves in the life of our church?

How have we...do we...and will we experience the realities of a counter-cultural gospel in a status-quo world?

It's a tough question, I know!

But even more important—is the question of how we've been freed to participate in the still (and in the ever) unfolding story of God's love in and of God's love for this world!

Seeing the hungry—how does God's mercy call us to set an extra place at the table?

Hearing the lonely—how does God's compassion call us to be companions to one another?

Witnessing the pain of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, gender-bias, and discrimination—how does God's love call us to be allies in the work of justice?

Standing on land that does not belong to us, while our indigenous siblings still weep for their lost ones—how does God's stillness call us to stop...and to listen...and to commit ourselves to the work of reconciliation?

Gathering inside walls that for far too long have turned people away—how does God's example of radical welcome call us to live fully into that same hospitality?

As people—I hope that we will choose to wrestle with these questions. But as a church—I PRAY that we will. For in loosening ourselves from the fears of the first truth—we will be freed to live more fully into the second.

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, author and professor Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The only real difference between anxiety and excitement was my willingness to let go of fear"⁴

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Brown. Learning To Walk In The Dark. Harper One. (2014) P. 82

To me, there is something strikingly beautiful about this quote that drives to the heart of the matter this morning. Christ has freed us, dear siblings and partners on this journey. Christ has freed us to let go of our fear: the fears of being ignored or judged...the fears of being disregarded or side-eyed...the fears of being thought strange or even dangerous to the status quo...and to embrace the excitement (THE EXCITEMENT) made possible by a gospel that beckons us out of those anxious places...and into the possibility of a world freed to live more fully all because the love of God has been whispered into its ears.

May we, the church, hear those whispers!

May we sense the Spirits leading!

And may we go forth, confident in the promise that the one who first wrote us into this story...continues to call us away from fear—and into a world set free.

For this we say—Thanks be to God.

AMEN.