

Mark 6:14-29 (NLT)

The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ Herod Antipas, the king, soon heard about Jesus, because everyone was talking about him. Some were saying, “This must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. That is why he can do such miracles.” ¹⁵ Others said, “He’s the prophet Elijah.” Still others said, “He’s a prophet like the other great prophets of the past.”

¹⁶ When Herod heard about Jesus, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has come back from the dead.”

¹⁷ For Herod had sent soldiers to arrest and imprison John as a favor to Herodias. She had been his brother Philip’s wife, but Herod had married her. ¹⁸ John had been telling Herod, “It is against God’s law for you to marry your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹ So Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But without Herod’s approval she was powerless, ²⁰ for Herod respected John; and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him. Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him.

²¹ Herodias’s chance finally came on Herod’s birthday. He gave a party for his high government officials, army officers, and the leading citizens of Galilee. ²² Then his daughter, also named Herodias, came in and performed a dance that greatly pleased Herod and his guests. “Ask me for anything you like,” the king said to the girl, “and I will give it to you.” ²³ He even vowed, “I will give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom!”

²⁴ She went out and asked her mother, “What should I ask for?”

Her mother told her, “Ask for the head of John the Baptist!”

²⁵ So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, “I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!”

²⁶ Then the king deeply regretted what he had said; but because of the vows he had made in front of his guests, he couldn’t refuse her. ²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner to the prison to cut off John’s head and bring it to him. The soldier beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a tray, and gave it to the girl, who took it to her mother. ²⁹ When John’s disciples heard what had happened, they came to get his body and buried it in a tomb.

John's Head; What's the Point?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: July 12, 2009 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: *Mark 6:14-29*

It was in junior high school, as I recall, that I first understood that there was a generation gap, or maybe it was a culture gap, between me and my mother. Mother had her reservations about the junior high dance. I moaned, "O Mom, for crying out loud, I'm old enough." She answered, "I don't care how old you are. You could be a grown man for all I care. Don't you remember what happened to John the Baptist?" I confessed that I did not, and she told me the today's gospel lesson. She explained, "Herodius came in and danced, and John the Baptist got his head cut off." I remember thinking that that qualified for a phrase I had just learned in school; that was definitely a *non-sequitur*.

It was only years later that I caught the whole logic of the thing. My brother, by then of college age and visiting family in Louisiana intended to go to the dance. Uncle Johnny* said, "O Chris you don't want to do that?"

Chris thought for a second and said, "I don't? Why not?"

"Well now, Chris," Johnny explained, "when you're out there on the floor dancing up close to your girlfriend, holding each other real tight, and moving and swaying to that music, when you're doing all those things, Chris, do you think good thoughts are going to be going through your mind?" They knew he was a lost cause when Chris said, "O yeah, I'll be thinking real good thoughts!"

Well, I won't comment on whether dancing leads to good thoughts or bad ones, but I do want to say that the point of the story of John the Baptist's beheading isn't about the evils of dancing or even of sex. The human frailty the story depicts is much more serious.

It will help to recall a bit of history. You will remember the father of the Herod in this morning's story. The father of this morning's Herod was Herod the Great. When the Wise Men stopped by Jerusalem on their way to Bethlehem, they met King Herod the Great, a suspicious and conniving ruler. They met a man paranoid in his protection of his crown, paranoid enough to order the slaughter of a whole city's children to make sure he killed an infant that a bunch of astrologers had told him would one day be king.

Welcome to the world of leadership in the Roman Empire. Herod the Great ruled on two principles. The first was unswerving allegiance to Rome. Herod was the perfection of loyalty. There was not one move, not one decision he ever made without fully informing Rome of exactly what he was thinking and receiving its full support. Herod the Great's other major principle of leadership was, watch your back. Thus, his concern about the Wise Men's report.

For much of his reign Herod the Great's two principles served him well. When others tried to unseat him, he saw them coming, and his known loyalty to Rome assured the Emperor's support in dispatching the problem. Herod the Great managed the tempests of his reign with aplomb, for the most part.

But like all kingdoms and monarchs, he and his kingdom were fragile. You can juggle a hundred balls at once for awhile, but sooner or later the delicate timing and dexterity that hold

* Not real name

everything together falter and what was once a display of amazing nimbleness becomes dropped balls rolling hither and yon, out of reach, out of control.

For Herod the Great, the strains came near the end of his reign when family squabbles and intrigues spun out of control. Conspiracy and brutality increased. Sons one day expected to inherit the throne, the next their father had them executed. Finally disease added itself to Herod the Great's woes. At all corners, his political house of cards trembled, if it didn't entirely fall. It was into this circumstance that the Wise Men wandered. No wonder they found an edgy king.

When Herod the Great died shortly after this, his will left a kingdom divided among three heirs. By terms of the will none had his power; by temperament none had his ability. One of the three successors was Herod Antipas, the Herod we read of in today's Gospel. Mark refers to him as King Herod, but he was really a regional governor, unlike his father who was a king by Rome's decree.

So here we are in Herod Antipas's court. He's giving a party for the officials and leaders of Galilee. Now, this Herod is a complicated man with a complicated life. For example, he has married his half-brother's wife, Herodias. She also happens to be his niece. In marrying Herodius, he has angered his half-brother Phillip, as well as his own father-in-law. So they're both out to get him. Then there was the prophet John the Baptist. John, not known for his subtle political statements, has cried out far and wide that Herod's marriage to Herodias is unlawful and immoral, which seems to have especially infuriated Herodias. In any case, Herod has John arrested and imprisoned.

So here we are at a court party. Behind the scene, in prison lies John the Baptist. Herod's wife Herodias is smoldering at the prophet. At the party, the couple's little daughter, also called Herodias, performs a dance to the delight of the governor and all the guests. Herod and his guests applaud with glee, and the governor promises the little girl whatever she wishes, expecting it will be lollipops or maybe a jewel-encrusted necklace. But the child confers with her mother, "What shall I ask for?" The mother says, the head of John the Baptist. Herod is grieved deeply, but a promise is a promise he figures, so whack goes the head of John.

But Herod was grieved deeply. Herod, the governor of Galilee, had liked to go to the prison and listen to his prisoner. He had liked to listen to John the Baptist.

I imagine Herod going down to the prison in the cover of night. I imagine him pulling up a stool outside the cell of John the Baptist. I imagine him asking John to tell him some more of his stories, some more of his ideas. It is fair to say, as the text does, that Herod was baffled. What John said drew a picture of a world so contrary to the world Herod took for granted that he could hardly make sense of it. And yet, there was something deeply compelling about what John said. There was something about it that Herod just couldn't let go of.

John had come onto the Galilean scene preaching a message of repentance for forgiveness of sins. What that rather obtuse phrasing means was that John came preaching a different way of living. He came preaching that the current way of living was so problematic that it required God's forgiveness. It required changing one's ways and values. And this is why it's so important to understand that Herod's downfall wasn't simply lust. The whole set of values and givens by which Herod lived were the kinds of things that John was calling into question, was calling him to repentance from. And Herod was captivated by the message.

It didn't take long before Herod's discomfort wasn't exactly bafflement, at least if what we mean by that was that he didn't understand John. It's more likely that Herod began to understand all too well. Indeed, he began to understand not only what John was saying, but also that John was right. But if John were right, realized Herod, then the governor's whole way of

doing business wasn't. Intrigue, power plays, governance by threat, warfare, the spoils of privilege, the whole way he related to family, friends and adversaries, the things that give satisfaction and meaning in life, every way that Herod organized his life, the whole way he had viewed and lived in the world, were wrong. They did not work, according to John. And Herod could see that John was right.

That evening in the court his daughter danced and his wife forced his hand. Herod was a man deeply grieved. For on the one hand Herod had come to understand that John was dead right, but on the other hand, looking out over all that had defined him, all he had striven for, all that the world had told him was what you live to acquire and achieve, Herod couldn't pull the trigger on changing his life. So instead, he gave the order to have brought to him on a silver platter the head of the one from whom he knew he had heard the truth, simply because he could not give up the lie.

It would be hard to miss the parallels between the story of John and the story of Jesus. Jesus, too, pronounced a way of life vastly different from the way of life that everyone else took for granted, even his own disciples. "Turn the other cheek. ... Walk the extra mile. ... Love your enemies. ... Lose your life to gain it. ... The son of man must suffer and be betrayed and die. ... This cup you will drink and this baptism will be yours. ... Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. ... Do not sit down at the place of honor. ... Don't pray to be noticed so that everyone thinks you are especially righteous. ... Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's. ... Don't point to the speck in your neighbor's eye when you have a log in your own. ... Forgive them for they know not what they do."

For these things Jesus was executed. His story is very like John's.

And that's the point, I think. The story of Jesus' death is not so very unusual. Deaths like his and for offenses like his are commonplace throughout the course of human history. We hear the idea that what makes Jesus so special, that what brings us salvation is that Jesus died for us. But left at that, it is a very bad idea.

Paul Nuechterlein writes,

"What are the consequences of a Christian misunderstanding on this score? If we strive to make Jesus' death unique, because he was the Son of God, what does that do to our theology? Doesn't it separate it from exactly those whom the gospels seem to go to great pains to join us with, namely, the countless victims ...? Doesn't the cross mean to bring Christ and us into solidarity with those folks? But what happens to such a solidarity if we make the cross a unique death? Isn't the gospel instead about the uniqueness of the cross's revelatory power so that we might choose to join Christ in being in solidarity with victims?"[†]

Nuechterlein hits the nail on the head. It's not Jesus' death that is so unusual. It's the fact that Jesus' innocence is so obvious that it is impossible to make a convincing argument that he deserved it. Jesus revealed, then, the ways of human fallenness, of the principalities and powers, no matter whether they are large or petty.

Here's the deal. When someone like John comes along and pushes against the ways of the world, the world strikes back. And almost always the striking back is made out to be justified. Herod had to kill John because Herod had made a promise to give his dancing daughter whatever she wished. It was a matter of honor. Terrorists blow up their victims for the glory of God. Nations go to war claiming the blessing of God. Abortion doctors are murdered because they have no respect for human life. It's always justified, always made out to be right and

[†]Paul John Nuechterlein, *Girardian Lectionary Commentary* (www.girardianlectionary.net).

righteous. That is the great lie, that the world is justified in victimizing its victims. It's what Rene Girard calls the great human scapegoating mechanism.

This is what Jesus came to reveal, to show us the face of our fallenness, and to show us how commonplace and universal it is.

The uniqueness of his death is that it revealed that John's death and literally those of millions of others were and are just like his death. In that sense he definitely died to save us.

Resurrection shows that in the end, the powers and principalities are wrong and weak. Herod sat on the stool and talked with John and glimpsed it.

We who are heirs to this story do, too, in large part because Jesus' death and resurrection reveal not only the love of God, but also that our ways are not God's ways, and that God's ways will make us whole and new. Amen.