

“15 verses in Mark”
8th Sunday after Pentecost – July 15, 2018 – Mark 6:14-29

Grace and peace to you from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For those of you who have been following along and picking up the particularities of Mark's Gospel, you already know that Mark is the Cliff's Notes of the Jesus story. It's the shortest. Everything happens *immediately*. There is no extraneous information. There are no extra details. Just the facts, Ma'am. Taking a question from professor Karoline Lewis, "So, why would Mark spend 15 precious verses on this story? Especially 15 verses where neither Jesus nor the Kingdom of God are mentioned?"

Well, by this time, the resistances to the Gospel are constant and intentional, so the story of John's beheading is a critical warning for followers to be aware that any witness to an alternative kingdom, belief, government, or empire leads to an unfortunate end. Mark continues to stir the pot, helping them understand the cost of discipleship which demands a constant state of re-questioning, re-evaluating, re-wondering. While each Gospel moment asks us, ***just what is at the heart of your faith?***

In today's story we are over half-way through Jesus' public ministry. Another Markan sandwich (two stories intertwined, just as Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman a few weeks ago.) This one begins with the sending out of 12 disciples for their first mission, and ends at their return, which drew a crowd of about 5,000 folks who got really hungry. In the middle, we have an example of just how hungry people can get.

"Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems," writes Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood, *"and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of the problems."* Herod has been hearing about Jesus casting out demons, curing the sick – and getting famous enough for public attention and rumors. Some say he's Elijah or a prophet, but some say he is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod is scared. Because he is the one who'd had John beheaded.

It has been said that ***"if nothing else you can be a really good bad example..."*** Herod, Herodias and the other Herodias/Salome are indeed that. Bad examples. If you think **our** world in **our** time has lost its way, you just have to read these 15 verses from Mark to see that some things never change. And this is one horrific story. Right up there with some we hear today. Stories that disgust us. Stories that deeply disappoint us. Stories that scare us. Stories that make us weep. But, hearing this story as just a bunch of evil – leaves us only sitting at a table and pointing to other than ourselves. It does not lead us into a faithful questioning of how we should respond to that bad, evil or despicable action by others. It does not lead us into using our power for justice either on a grand, sacrificial way, or a small yet meaningful way.

For example, what if one of the men in the crowd had stood up and told Salome that she need not "entertain" them for their pleasure, covered her with his cloak and sent her from the room?

What if someone had taken Herod aside and whispered that a promise made in such a situation was better broken than carried out? And they made him look ridiculous.

What if someone had stepped in and countered the offer with a more age-appropriate reward?

What if someone had called out Herodias and Herod (oh, someone did.) But, you get the idea. WWJD? What would YOU do?

During the first summer of seminary we were all assigned to our “Cross Cultural Experiences” and I was sent to Bethlehem Lutheran Church, an African-American church in Oakland, to learn from Pastor Will Herzog, a pioneer in the Civil Rights movement who had marched with Dr. King. He told me that all I needed to know about preaching I could find using just two resources: The Bible, and the daily newspaper. Well, I have had many different Bibles since then, all containing the same words. But my source of news, much like yours, I bet, has expanded dramatically from print to digital, from newscasts to blogs and even social media. And sometimes someone posts something in the midst of my sermon prep that slams up against the Bible story I’m working on. This week, against the backdrop of these particular 15 verses in Mark, author James Baldwin stepped right out of Facebook and entered into the conversation with Herod, Herodias and the other Herodias. He spoke to me as well: *I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.*

Dealing with someone who is dealing with pain takes compassion and patience. But when that someone is not loveable, or is judged as downright evil, it takes the strength of God’s love to move out of ourselves and into solidarity with the one who is suffering, often beyond our understanding. Let’s imagine the pain of Herod: He had heard about Jesus since he was a kid, and how his Daddy, Herod “The Great” had tried and failed, to kill him. That kind of frustration, perhaps even obsession with another little boy had to go down hard. On top of that, Rome refused him the title of King, and he had a long way to go to live up to the old man. Maybe that’s why he found solace in his brother’s wife; then everything was fine until John the Baptist started pointing fingers, and the tiniest pangs of guilt started rising up meeting only a vast emptiness.

And Herodias’ pain? Whilst we can probably assume that her husband Philip was not her soulmate, her brother in law, Herod Antipas, wasn’t working out either. He was obsessed as well, with John – in a love/fear relationship – he loved to hear John talk, but he feared what he was saying and what kind of following he had. And Herodias knew that if John ever succeeded in getting Herod to repent of his relationship with her, well...Herodias was out of the lifestyle of the rich and famous. A single mom with a teenager who came from a broken home she created.

And poor Salome: She sounds like a character out of Game of Thrones – a pawn, dragged from her home and Daddy Philip - so the only place she had to turn was to the mom who chose for them to leave to go live with Herod. She seems to have fallen in with a pretty racy crowd herself – which leads her to dancing for a bunch of old guys at her “favorite” uncle’s birthday party. Confused, lost, caught.

Pain. Hate. Anger. These dark emotions get buried, in hopes they never sprout. But we know what happens to things that get buried when Jesus is around.

At the end of the story the final verse says, the disciples came and took John’s body, and laid it in a tomb. One response to untimely, unreasonable death is the religious ritual. If we try to make sense of the existence of this story, we might take comfort that it is available right here to foreshadow Jesus’ death, so we can prepare for what is coming. The disciples carried on. Here, burying a body with no head, for Jesus burying a body that would not stay in the tomb. (Apparently you can kill the messenger, but another and another and another will take their place.) The good keeps getting raised up. Sin and death and pain get Resurrected. That is our Christian hope. That is our Christian calling. To keep the line moving no matter what. To do whatever we can to bring God’s wholeness wherever there is hunger, or pain, or fear. Do justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly among those God loves.

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Resources: Karoline Lewis, "Beheading the Gospel," *Working Preacher*; Peter Wallace, "Let's Dance," *Day1*; Moffett Churn, "Herod's Pursuit of Power," *The Christian Century*; Mike Kern/Pastors' Text study

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