SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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July 11, 2021

*“Speaking Our Way Into Life”* Mark 6:14-29

**Let us begin by agreeing that this morning’s Scripture lesson is not a pretty one. I was going to say that it is one of the harder passages in the Bible, but—truth be told—if we really take the Bible seriously (and I sincerely hope we all do), then all of the Bible is difficult. Which is to say: all of it—even passages like this one—are able to change us in some way, *for the good.***

**This is one of those passages…However, it *is* able to bless us but only *if we are willing to struggle with it*; if we are willing and able to look past the sensational aspects and see what is happening within the human relationships that are portrayed here. If we can do that, we *will* come away blessed.**

**To begin with: we have Herod Antipas. Before we go any further, I was asked this morning, “Why are there so many Herods in the Herod diocese?” Well, the family was a large one and, yes, they seem to recycle the name “Herod” quite a bit. I am not sure if that saved any time or energy but that is what they have here. The Herod in this passage is Herod Antipas, a mighty king—at least that is the way it looks on the surface. However, as many of us know: Herod did not have the kind of pedigree and bearing as one hopes to find in kings.**

**Herod—we should also acknowledge—was one of many Herods who populate the story and the life of Christ. If you remember his nativity, there was a Herod, the king then, He was Herod the Great. Herod Antipas was one of his sons. All of them were corrupt and despised by the Israelite people. This was because Herod Antipas, and all of the kings of his family, were not kings by royal bloodline. They were kings in Israel because Rome had put them into power. In truth, the Herods—all of them—they were opportunists and collaborators with the Romans who had put on the throne in hopes of keeping the Israelites mollified, or at least a little less likely to raise rebellions.**

**This worked to a certain degree, because no one was fooled. All the people knew that the Herodians were puppets. They were only marginally Jewish, too, but at least they *knew* the Law of Moses, unlike a Gentile might have. So, they were at least a little less of an abomination than a pagan might have been.**

**In the case of Herod Antipas, he was at least mindful enough of Hebrew law and history to be unsure of himself when it came to John the Baptist. Indeed, his uncertainty was such that although he had arrested and imprisoned John—based on the things John was saying about him and his current wife. Still, Herod Antipas was unable or unwilling to execute him…until the passage that we heard this morning.**

**The Gospel of Mark tells us that Herod Antipas was somehow fascinated with John the Baptist and what he had been preaching. I cannot help but wonder if, under all of that pomp and circumstance, Herod Antipas heard, and was actually moved, by John’s call to repentance?**

**We do not have any of John’s sermons and so we do not know what he specifically said in them. Most of us assume that he was like some of the firey Baptist preachers we have seen in our times—preachers who are very animated in their convictions, unhesitating in their rebukes and condemnations, preachers who know us all as “sinners in the hands of an angry god.”**

**Perhaps John was just that firey. However, I cannot help but wonder what else he said. I wonder what it was that made Herod Antipas fear and respect John. What chord did John touch in him?**

**Words have the power to do that, you know. Words are important because they have the power to awaken powerful feelings in the hearts and lives of all of us. Words, and the way we use them, help form us into the people we are—they describe who we are, and they can remind us of who we might be.**

**Words can also deeply wound us.**

**In the case of John the Baptist: while Herod was moved by John’s words to curiosity and fear, Herod’s wife, Herodias, was moved to murderous anger. In fact, her resentment of the truth John had been proclaiming about her was so deep that, when presented with an opportunity to silence John, she took it.**

**As I said before, we do not have the content of John’s sermons, the way we have of Jesus’ sermons. However, we do know that John criticized Herod *and* Herodias in the strongest terms about the way in which they had come to be married.**

**Herodias, in order to marry Herod, had divorced her husband—who was, by the way, Herod Antipas’ half-brother. But there is more: in order to marry, Herod also had to divorce *his* wife.**

**All of this would have been difficult enough, but as we all know: royal marriages are also about political alliances. In divorcing one partner in order to marry Herodias, Herod Antipas had rejected a princess of a neighboring country. He broke a political alliance he had made through the marriage thereby plunging Israel into a war with the offended princess’ home country of Nabatea. Apparently, the Nabatean anger was such that they dealt Herod’s forces a crushing blow.**

**So, John the Baptist’s criticism may also have included how badly Herod Antipas and Herodias’ infidelity had brought dishonor and harm to the whole of the country. Their shame was more than private. Their personal conduct, their lack of faithfulness, had consequences for all of the people. This, in its turn, cast doubt on both of their characters and their fitness for the high position they occupied. And as I mentioned earlier, Herod Antipas and his whole clan, had little standing or respect among the Israelites as it was.**

**So, because of all of this, Herodias decided to silence John the Baptist. She wanted to put a stop to the truth about her and her husband from being proclaimed. I do not know if she thought her reputation would be redeemed if John was dead. In that place and time, shame and honor were everything, perhaps her anger toward John was so great that she simply wanted him dead.**

**In the end, I suppose it does not really matter. John was executed. Like Jesus would be, too, John was treated with great indignity and contempt in the way he was killed.**

**Also like Jesus, John’s truth was not silenced. His words were important—even if we do not have the texts of his sermons—they served their purpose then, and they can still serve their purpose for us, today.**

**The sordid and brutal story of the death of John the Baptist can still move us to recognize what happens to people in our lives, like John the Baptist, people who are truth-tellers among us. People like John will not be silent even when it is dangerous for them to speak the truth. Their love of the justice truth can bring is so great that many truth-tellers suffer enormously—in return, they are often insulted, slandered, and shunned. Sometimes, they are persecuted even to the point of death.**

**I believe John’s story was preserved for us because it was a portrait of the escalating corruption and violence that would pave the way for the public and shameful way in which power would also execute and attempt to silence Jesus.**

**God’s great love for humankind, and the way in which love can topple regimes of violence and fear—this was the story, these were the words, that power and empire tried to silence when it executed John the Baptist and Jesus. Jesus, who even from the cross, spoke words of love and forgiveness saying,** “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.”

**It did not work. They were not silenced because there were people whose lives had been changed. These are the people who saw and experienced the kind of freedom God’s love can bring when justice and compassion become the rule of their life.**

**Indeed, the love of God can become life. This is what the disciples knew, and what we can know also: that God’s love can bring new life into the human community, even life everlasting.**

**I have never preached on this particular passage before because I have never understood it in quite the same way I do today.**

**Having lived through the last few years of our country, and in the life of the world, I am once again astonished at how directly God speaks to us through the Bible. In this vivid and extreme story of violence, we are reminded of what human beings can do to one another when we try to silence each other, when we refuse to hear the truth about ourselves.**

**However, it is more than that, too. We also open the door to the kind of violence this story portrays when we refuse to hear the truth that others want to tell us about themselves and their experience, when they try to tell us their story.**

**We will not always agree with others’ version of history, even their own, but I am convinced that the very least we must be willing to do is listen. Even when the story is painful, even when it is ugly. As hard as it is, I believe the only way forward is if we are able to hear one another’s truth—*all* of it—if we are able to speak, confident that we may at least be heard, or as the Rev. Jessie** Obrecht of the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has written:

*We also speak redemption, love, and grace that flows from the heart of Christ and empowers those in power to do what is right. This power is deconstructing and reconstructing, it tumbles tables, destroys temples, breaks down barriers, and rebuilds a Kingdom on a new foundation of equity, love, and justice for all.*

**As we remember this story and its tragic end, my hope is that it will elicit in each one of us a desire to ask ourselves: who are the people in our lives who are the truth-tellers and to whom we are reluctant to listen? Who is telling a story we do not want to hear? And how might we make a space in our lives to do so?**

**Our good news is that God never tires of telling us his story because she has made a place for each of us in it—a speaking part that can build bridges, heal wounds, and bring wholeness to our lives, all our families, all our communities—all of God’s beloved people.**

**Let us pray together:**

**Gracious and holy God we AWAIT,** hands at our hearts, cupped, open and waiting for your presence, not as we expect, hope, or imagine. We await your words, your truth.

Reaching up with our hands open, we **ALLOW** your presence to come and be what it is, without expectations of our own, only a desire to receive you.

Lord, with our hands closed around your offering of love, we **ACCEPT** as a gift whatever comes. We accept that you are in charge. We accept the infinity of your presence, whether or not we fully understand or are aware.

As we reach out, ready to respond to your love, we commit promise to **ATTEND** to the actions of compassion and love to which you call us, in an attitude of openness to your Spirit, and your love for your people, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Amen.