

Untitled

Mark 6:14-29

July 11, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

A couple of Sundays ago, Fred and Sheila's daughter Heidi gave me a really meaningful compliment. She said, "I love how you always connect the Scripture to real life." Well. I was flattered, and grateful. That's exactly what I try to do, what I work hard to do, what I believe the role of a preacher is, and to have her share that compliment pleased me. Lest I get all full of myself and pat myself on the back too much, the lectionary passage for today is laughing at me. I have to tell you, this passage is tough, especially in the "connecting it to real life" arena. I've never preached on it before, but for some reason this seemed like a good idea on Monday. When David and I were collaborating on hymns for today, we had a hard time finding any that referenced John the Baptist's head on a platter. It's a gruesome image, though artists have painted the scene, in various levels of detail through the centuries. You might notice that there's not a title for the sermon in the bulletin. Etta didn't forget it. She waited patiently all week for me to come up with something, and as of Friday, I still had no idea.

Part of what makes this passage hard is that Jesus does not appear in it, the only story in Mark that doesn't include him. It's an unusually long and detailed story for Mark to tell, too. No character in the story is likeable—they each have their own significant flaws and only minor assets. And as my friend said this week, "Where is the good news?"

I'm supposing that this story isn't overly familiar to you, especially in its details, so let's take a closer look. It's told as a flashback story. Mark has told us in the fourteenth verse of the first chapter, that John has been put in prison. It's almost a throwaway comment, except that it would be good for us to remember that Mark doesn't throw in extra comments for no reason. He's preparing us for this story, which in turn prepares us for later events.

Sometime in John's preaching career, he had called out Herod—this is not the same Herod that we know from the Christmas story, the one who tried to trick the wise men, but it is one of his sons—John the Baptist had called out Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Herod had been married before and had his wife executed. Herodias was married to one of his brothers, and it seems that Herod sort of stole her from his brother. John proclaims that this was a bad idea and against Jewish law besides. Yes, this was a moral issue, but John's speaking the truth to a powerful political figure was also a political statement. This is why Herod had John thrown in jail—because John had called him out, and Herodias didn't like it. She wanted him killed right then and there, but Herod intervened and had him imprisoned instead. Herod, Mark indicates, was a little intrigued by John, knew that he was righteous, was a little afraid of him. Herod wasn't ready to kill John, I think because he couldn't quite figure John out yet.

It was not "out of sight, out of mind" for Herodias while John was in prison. She remembered. She was resentful. She held a grudge. And she waited for the opportune time to get her revenge. Remember how I said none of the characters were likable? About the nicest thing I can say about Herodias is that she was a talented strategic planner. But she didn't use her talents for good, obviously.

It's Herod's birthday. All the movers and shakers of Galilee are at the party. Here is Herodias's opportunity to get her revenge on John the Baptist. It's not at all clear how things happen. Mark says the daughter of Herod comes in to the party and dances. If that is the case, she is quite young because Herod and Herodias had not been married all that long, which agrees with Mark's use of the word "little girl," to describe her, which is the same word he uses to describe Jairus's daughter, from last week's scripture reading, which would make her about 12. Not how she has been pictured. She might be, instead, Herod's step daughter, Herodias's daughter with Herod's brother, and in that case would be older. A great deal of interpretation depends on her age. If she is indeed a little girl, then she is a pawn,

used unconscionably by her mother, to get revenge. If she's a little older than she might bear some responsibility of her own, though the scheme is clearly Herodias's idea.

The daughter comes in and dances in such a way as to enchant Herod. He is so enchanted that he promises her anything she wants, even half of his kingdom. Again, the interpretation of her dancing depends a lot on how old she is. Herod could be just as creepy as you imagine he could be.

But I'll say I was enchanted this week when I saw a video of Zaila, the fourteen year old girl who won the National Spelling Bee. Did you happen to catch this? She correctly spells the winning word, a word I've never heard of, and when the announcer says she has done it correctly, she does this little twirl, which is adorable. It turns out that she also holds three Guinness world records, various things that have to do with bouncing basketballs and juggling. I saw a video where she's doing this. She's bouncing three basketballs and juggling three smaller balls, all at the same time. And then the video cuts to her juggling and bouncing *while riding a unicycle!* I think I might have been willing to promise to give her half of my kingdom, too.

So there is a small chance that Herod's enchantment at the dancing daughter is rated G. But he makes this rash promise in front of all of those important people. Now Herod is powerful, undoubtedly. But he also could have been removed from his post by the Emperor. So he needs to keep up his image.

The daughter has no idea what to ask for, when Herod makes this vow. She goes and asks Herodias her mother, who says, "Go tell him you want John the Baptist's head." So the girl returns to Herod and adds "immediately" and "on a platter" as embellishments to the request.

Herod is stuck. He still is kinda intrigued by John the Baptist, isn't sure that killing him is going to be a wise thing to do, but he has made this vow in front of everyone and doesn't want to damage his image or prestige. So he has John beheaded. Immediately. And the soldier puts the head on a platter, gives it to the daughter, who takes it to her mother.

A sordid tale, to be sure.

That all happened at some point between Mark 1:14 and chapter 6. Herod is remembering all of this when Jesus's disciples have been sent out. He thinks that maybe Jesus is John the Baptist, raised back to life. Other people are saying maybe he's Elijah, or a prophet. But Herod thinks Jesus is John.

Jesus was someone who didn't hesitate to say the truth, no matter who got offended about it. And now that we know what happened to John when he did that, the crucifixion shouldn't come as a surprise.

Connecting this to real life, now, that's a hard word to hear. Speaking the truth to those who are powerful, when it's something they don't want to hear can have consequences. But neither John nor Jesus let those consequences prevent them from doing what was right. I imagine that applies to some situation in your real life. It does in mine. May God give us the courage to speak the truth.