## Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.”Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Martin Luther once said that sometimes you have to squeeze a biblical passage until it leaks the gospel. It's sort of like squeezing grapes for their juice. At first glance, this story from Mark looks like it will need a lot of squeezing, maybe some stomping, too, before the gospel begins to seep out. It's really not that hard once you get past the creepy parts, so let's do that first. First, the death of John. A beheading is never good news. John the Baptist dies under the command of Herod and for some pretty hideous reasons. First, John has angered Herod because Herod has basically stolen his brother's wife away from him and John has called him out on it. It's not enough for Herodias, Herod's new wife, that Herod has had John thrown in prison for speaking the truth about the relationship. Herodias isn't happy that she has been criticized for what she has done so she looks for a chance to land the final blow on John and be rid of him forever. She is stymied by her husband's apparent respect for John as a man of faith and honor. If Herod won't have John put to death, Herodias will find a way to do it.

Herodias finally gets her chance, which comes with its own creepiness quotient. When Herod throws a birthday party for himself, his wife's daughter – Herod's step-daughter – dances for him. Herod is so taken with the daughter – creepy! - that he promises her anything she wants. Rather than ask for jewels or clothing, daughter goes to mother for her input. Here's Herodias' big break. She instructs her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter. Herod finds he can't back out of his foolish promise so he has the gruesome deed done. John is gone but his message about Jesus cannot die. I wonder if Herod has been haunted by what he has done, for when he hears what people are saying about Jesus, he thinks Jesus is John brought back from the dead to torment him.

Herod will face Jesus soon enough and that encounter will end in frustration for the ruler of Galilee. When Jesus won't answer Herod's accusations, he has him dressed in elegant garments and sends him back to Pilate, paving the way for Jesus' execution. So, a man steals his sister-in-law, marries her, makes foolish promises to his step-daughter for possible lewd reasons, ends up with John's blood on his hands and then is bloodied by Jesus' execution. It's the stuff of soap operas, to be sure, but also the stuff of real life. For those who seek power and will do anything to get it are often threatened by the truth and will go to extreme measures to silence it.

So here's the gospel message in all of this: truth wins out in the end. John's message about Jesus coming to bring forgiveness for the sins of God's people is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus, the long-promised Messiah. Herod, Pilate and many others don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear about Jesus teaching and healing and promising salvation to the masses. It undermines their authority. It's not enough to kill the messenger, so they kill the one the message is about. What they haven't anticipated is resurrection. In the end, these men can't kill Jesus or his power. Eventually, someone more powerful than Herod comes along and banishes him to France, where he and Herodias live out their lives in the comfort of a villa and their lust for one another. It could be worse, I suppose, but the power Herod craves is gone as happens with all earthly rulers with time.

As the Irish band U2 sings, “Love is bigger than anything in its way.” It's true. Love is bigger than hate. Compassion is bigger than malice. Truth is bigger than lies. Healing is bigger than hurting. Peace is bigger than war. Jesus is bigger than those who are threatened by him. Though following Jesus may be dangerous at times, may even cause his followers to lose their heads, it is their faithfulness to Jesus' love that changes the world. It is their action that counters the Herods of the world and ushers in the kingdom of God. There is still high tension between Jesus and those who are threatened by him. The world needs to see tangible signs of Jesus to know what is possible, what is real and what is true. Timothy Snyder, author of the book, *On Tyranny*, writes that it is not enough to believe that all will be well. He says we have to practice shaping the society we want and resisting the kind of society we do not.

Fortunately for us, Snyder has some ideas for how we do this. Some of the practices are grounded in the public sphere: defending institutions, practicing ethical conduct in our professions, becoming active in voluntary organizations. In our private lives, Snyder says we can make eye contact and small talk with people we encounter in the course of daily life. Making eye contact and exchanging greetings are practices by which we recognize each other's humanity. This helps reach people in their isolation and despair and knit us all into a shared life. In addition, Snyder suggests that we speak to people more in person and try to use the internet less often. He urges us to go to places we don't usually go and make new friends. He encourages us to resist expressing ourselves with the slogans and phrases that everyone else is using and to cultivate new ways of saying what we mean. He recommends surrounding ourselves with books. The Bible, fiction and history books all open us to the world in which we live. Even the creepy parts. Snyder says that when we gather to pray, to serve, to share a meal in which there is enough for everyone, we have the opportunity to practice being the people and the society we hope to be, the society Jesus is making of us.

John the Baptist's head on a platter is evidence of how cruel and unjust this world can be. John's voice has survived the violence of his death and the one about whom he preached lives for us and in us. Each Sunday we gather around a platter on which is not a decapitated head, but the bread of heaven given for us for the sake of the world. Though Herodias delighted in the shedding of John's blood, Christ's blood is poured out to save us.

Sometimes the good news of the gospel is encased in the most gruesome of circumstances. Look at Jesus, at how he died and why. Knowing that God enters our human story in all its messiness and cruelty shows us how far God will go to love us, that God is in this with us for the long run, until we are the world we can be. For love is bigger than anything in its way.

Amen.

*Pentecost 8B*

*July 15, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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