Pentecost 7 Proper 10

July 11, 2021

Mark 6:14-29

Our Gospel reading for today sounds like it could have been torn from the pages of a *Game of Thrones* novel. It’s full of intrigue and features a ruler who is bent on demonstrating and pursuing power at any cost.

The Herod in our story today isn’t the Herod from the Nativity story, though he’s not really any better than that one.

On the occasion of his birthday, Herod threw a banquet. As is often the case of those who were in his kind of position, Herod was keen to demonstrate his wealth and status. Doing so brought him more honor.

After his daughter, who was probably a young girl, danced for the guests, Herod boldly promised her anything she wanted, up to and including half of his kingdom. Which, since he ruled on Rome’s behalf, wasn’t really his to give away. But that doesn’t stop him from saying something designed to impress those in attendance and inflate his own self-importance.

The little girl goes to find her mother, Herodias, to ask what she should request.

And Herodias, who appears to have been every bit the scheming, power-hungry person as her husband, decided that this was her chance to get revenge on someone who had dared to publicly criticize her — John the Baptist.

Herodias hated John for a simple reason — John dared to speak out about Herod’s marriage to the woman who had previously been his brother’s wife. Given that John spoke up about the relationship, it’s safe for us to assume that Herod’s brother didn’t die a natural death. If he was dead at all. It’s quite possible that Herodias divorced him so that she could marry Herod.

In a gruesome turn of events, Herodias tells her little girl to go back and ask her father for John’s head.

Herod had a choice to make. He could decline his daughter’s request — which he undoubtedly knew came from his wife. But to renege on a promise made in front of people he wanted to impress would make him look weak. Refusing her request would bring shame upon him.

But the choice he makes is even more shameful, because he knows it’s not the right one to make. Mark tells us that Herod liked John, liked listening to him, but knew that John was dangerous. By shaming Herod publicly, John threatened Herod’s ability to rule as he wanted.

Herod made a decision that served his own interests, made him look strong. Made him look like a man of his word. A man of honor.

And so, out of political expediency and a desire for revenge, John is killed.

Our story today tells us that there were rumors flying around about who Jesus was. One of them was that he was John resurrected. That didn’t sit well with Herod, of course.

But that one little detail tells us something important: If people thought Jesus was John resurrected, then Jesus must have been doing things and saying things to invite the comparison. Which ought to give pause to those who insist that Jesus’ message and ministry were not political.

Mark somewhat awkwardly places this story in the midst of his account of Jesus’ life and ministry. But that location serves a big purpose.

Just before our passage for today, we hear about Jesus in his hometown. There, the people who knew him best, the people who had watched him grow up, reject his message and reject the healing and wholeness he offers.

Fresh from that disappointment, Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two, telling them to travel lightly and depend upon the hospitality of those they meet along the way. He gives them the gifts to allow them to bring healing and wholeness to those who welcome them, and instructions for what to do if they reject them.

And after our story for today, the disciples return, eager to tell Jesus about their experiences. Jesus takes them somewhere quiet, so they can talk about it, but people find them. A ***lot*** of people. Filled with compassion, Jesus turns a little bit of bread and a few fish into a meal that fills the bellies of thousands.

By placing the story of Herod and John in the midst of that tale, we’re meant to compare the lavishness and opulence of Herod’s birthday party with the humble work and food of Jesus and his followers.

And when we do that, we can easily see how the lifestyle Herod was keen to protect is dramatically different from the ways of Jesus.

And we can see that the good news of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God is not news happily received by all.

The death of John is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death at the hands of another political leader, acting at the behest of the Jewish leadership. Like John, Jesus died out of political expediency.

So by placing the story of John’s death in the midst of the story of Jesus sending out the disciples to continue his ministry, we learn that discipleship is not always easy. But we commit to it anyhow, because Jesus came to show us a path that was better than the one Herod trod.

Jesus came to show us that there’s more than the endless pursuit of power and status and honor.

“Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more even than mere success.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

He came to lead us to a path of abundant life. Not material prosperity for a few, but a life where *all* people have *enough*. Enough food, enough shelter, enough dignity, enough love so that they can live into who they were created to be.

That’s the good news. Because of Jesus, we trust that there’s a better path than the endless pursuit of power. It’s a path of service, a path of mercy and justice, a path of walking humbly with the God who loves us more than we can comprehend.

May our life of discipleship lead us to choose love over status, mercy and justice over power, and hope over fear.

1. David Lose, *Dear Working Preacher*, workingpreacher.org, July 8, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)