

“Power of Love”

A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoe The Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 12, 2009

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Dear Jesus, give us the strength not only to love you but to follow you, to walk behind you wherever you lead us. As we hear and think about your word to us today, fill us with your peaceful power that we may be the brave disciples that you deserve. Amen.*

Master preacher Fred Craddock tells the story about a preacher who stood at the back door of the church one Sunday, greeting his departing parishioners. One man approached him and said in a stern and serious tone: “This changes everything.” The preacher, not knowing what the man was talking about, said, “What Joe?” Joe said, “If what you said in the sermon is true, we can’t just go home and do what we thought we were going to do...our world is not right...we are called to put in place here and now God’s reign and God’s care for the planet and every person...Everything has changed!” The preacher, getting a little worried about Joe and his response to the sermon, found himself saying, before he realized it, “Now Joe, don’t get so worked up. I was just preaching!”

Some Sundays our scripture readings allow us preachers to “just preach”, and neither the preacher nor those of you in the pews are changed very much by what we say and what you hear. But some Sundays, when we least expect it, everything is different!

All four gospel writers include accounts of Jesus and his followers attracting the attention and curiosity of regional political leaders. Like the prophets of Israel, they remind us of the thin line between the secular and the sacred, the world of kings and that of God’s messengers. In the context of Roman imperial rule in God’s holy land is the story of John the Baptist’s gruesome execution at the hands of the Roman puppet

Herod Antipas. These stories seem to confirm the public nature of the Christian gospel, and they function to expose corrupt values which stand opposed to the way of God’s reign.

If you thought soap operas were only on afternoon television, then the story of this delightful dysfunctional family in our gospel text reminds us that things haven’t changed much over the centuries. Herod is Herod Antipas, son of that lovely King Herod who ordered that all male babies be killed when the Wise Men told him about the star leading them to the birth of the Messiah. While staying with his half-brother, also called Herod, en-route to Rome, he has an affair with Herodias, the wife of this half-brother, and later married her, divorcing his first wife.

Mark calls that half-brother Philip, and he and Herodias, Mark says had a daughter. We all know that at the end of her dance, when Herod said to her, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it,” she, at the request of her mother, asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

The story of Herod Antipas and his lurid birthday party function as sort of a morality play which reflects how people, even despite their intentions, are done in by their own deeds and the situations they create. The story also reminds us that the wages of sin are not only imbedded in the human heart, but at systemic, familial and political levels as well. Power corrupts all human institutions, and corrupted power always seems to have deadly effects on those who dare to speak against them.

Martin Luther King, in his sermon, “A Knock At Midnight” stressed that the church is not called to be the servant of the state, still less its master, but rather its conscience.” Don’t you love that!?! And, since it is both a theological and spiritual task, it calls for more and better theology. If the church is to speak prophetically to the political order, it must do so on the basis of sound theology and profound prayer, as well as accurate data and careful analysis.

Today’s Gospel lesson reminds us of the cost of discipleship. Those who follow Jesus are sometimes treated as Jesus was treated. The

powerful of the world, like Herod, do not sit idly by when their power is challenged. And in countless ways, Jesus is a challenge to the world’s power.

Our tendency is to more or less excuse Herod as the overly proud, seduced, entrapped or otherwise “bad” husband of Herodias. Yet we must grant that she had at least been taking seriously the negative comments of John the Baptist in regard her marriage to her former husband’s brother. Herod comes across as at best oblivious, and at worst dishonest. But at the end of the day, he still gave the orders.

Actually – when you think about it – I think you will agree that the best witness against Herod is Herod, himself. The entire account of John’s murder follows on his admission that he suspects the newly famous Galilean preacher, Jesus, to be John the Baptist resurrected. The story of the execution then represents a rare biblical specimen of flashback. Herod recalls all too well how he accommodated his wife’s anger at John by arresting him, but that he protected John and enjoyed listening to him even if there were times he found him to be confusing and sometimes even disturbing. Then Herod had him killed, pleading that he, Herod, could not do otherwise given his station and the situation – I guess you’d have to be a king to understand.

Actually, though, I think we understand all too well. We’ve never had someone put to death for reasons of state or social convenience, but then we’ve never had the chance or need to. Our concessions to convenience and convention come in different shapes. What we share with Herod is a willingness to cut our losses and walk away from what we know to be right when one who is other becomes a problem. Our ears stop working, as do our minds, and we simply leave.

John’s agenda wasn’t political. John was a prophet of God called to speak the gospel truth. And the gospel truth he was called to speak was repentance and righteousness. John’s call offered no room for negotiation, no room for mediation, no room for dispensation. John the

Baptist's call required the gospel truth of repentance and reform.

For Herod Antipas, the price of true repentance was far too steep. He couldn't admit his wrong-doing. He wouldn't send Herodias back to Herod Philip. He had flagrantly broken the Torah-directive that no man may marry his living brother's wife. John the Baptist understood Herod's actions as an offense not against Roman power or of Palestinian politics, or even the rules of good leadership. John the Baptist saw Herod's actions as an offense against God. John's moral integrity is what ultimately cost him his head.

John the Baptist, a man driven by the power of the word of God, is silenced by Herod Antipas, a man who wields the power of the sovereign. Roman State. The king silenced the preacher. A good person has been killed by the evil power of the State. You don't have to come to church and listen to the Bible to hear a story like that, though. Do you? When it comes to power, the one with the largest guns or the biggest bomb or the sharpest stick wins.

This is a rather conventional observation and you don't need the Bible to tell it to you. You can read about the perils of governmental power in any newspaper. You certainly don't need me to prove that to you in a sermon. And yet, if we read a bit deeper, we may discover a more interesting message. The message may not be simply that the powerless suffer because of the powerful, but the message also might be that there are different forms of power.

Herod Antipas was powerful enough to simply speak and a prophet's head was served up on a platter. That's power! But in suffering and dying, John the Baptist reveals the weakness which lurks in Herod's brand of power. Here is a king who has not only besmirched his sovereignty by having an affair with his brother's wife, but also a king who has stooped to killing the prophet John the Baptist, on the word of a young girl who has please him in her dance for him. This is power?

There is a great irony behind this violent story of the abuses of power. Herod executed John the Baptist in order to shut him up. But here we are today, still talking about John the Baptist, still remembering his prophetic words, still admiring his courage. We wouldn't be talking about Herod Antipas, except that he plays a bit part in the drama of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Think about it, until we heard his name in the story today, had you ever heard of Herod Antipas?! Herod couldn't shut up the gospel just by executing some of its preachers. He may have been able to kill the messenger, but the message continues to be shared.

Herod thought that he had once and for all put an end to the nuisance of this troublesome, outspoken prophet. But Herod was powerless to shut John up. The preaching continues. The gospel continues. The courage continues.

Right here in this congregation, the courage continues. Looking out at all of you this morning, I don't see many people that the world would regard as important, powerful people, and yet, it is a promise of the gospel that Jesus is busy subverting the old world and creating a new world through you. Every time you speak up for love in the face of hate, every time you tell the truth about injustice and reach out and attempt to subvert the injustice, you are showing power, true power, the power of God in Jesus Christ, the power of love. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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