

## PROPER TEN, PENTECOST SEVEN, YEAR B, JULY 11, 2021

You could take Game of Thrones, the Hatfields and McCoys, Macbeth, every dysfunctional reality TV family and Jerry Springer all rolled up together about unabated hatred, greed, rivalry, backstabbing, and murder and it still wouldn't hold a candle to today's Gospel story about the first century ruling family dynasty the Herodians.

The Herodian dynasty started with Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the patriarch of this family and was the ruler responsible for the rebuilding of the temple, developing a water system to Jerusalem and building the fortresses Masada and Herodium. Those were the good aspects of his reign. Herod executed many members of his family including his wife and when he died he left his kingdom to his three sons, Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas and Herod Philip I.

Herod Antipas is the Herod that is referred to in today's gospel. The back story to today's gospel begins when Herod decided to go visit his half brother Herod Philip. Herod was married when he visited Philip and fell in love with Philip's wife Herodias. Herod divorced his wife, Herodias divorced Philip and they married. But Herodias was also Herod's niece as she was the daughter of another half brother of Herod's. I told you this was more outrageous than a Jerry Springer show. This is the reason why John the Baptist attacked Herod because according to Jewish law he was in an incestuous relationship and two you do not marry the wife of a living brother. However, under Roman law it was not uncommon to marry a niece. So, Herodias took great offence to John's accusations, and she was determined to see him executed.

Now, there is a surprising detail in this story that is easily overlooked. Mark tells us that Herod Antipas was a "fan" of John the Baptist. John the Baptist's courageous message of repentance and forgiveness fascinated this ruthless ruler. Herod was Jewish by birth, but the Herodian dynasty ruled according to the whims of Rome and flagrantly disregarded Torah mandates that interfered with their political ambitions. Still Herod Antipas could hear the ring of truth and the clarity of John's call to repentance in his words. John's words flew in the face of Herod's absolute royal authority but they also stuck fast to his heart. What is fascinating about this story is that we're told Herod really liked to listen to John the Baptist. He liked what John said except when it was directed at him. So, if Herod really admired John, what made Herod fall prey to the whim of his wife that forced his hand to execute him.

Well, let me ask this question this morning. What truth is worth your life? It's been said there are two types of people in the world we despise. The first are people who can never be trusted to tell the truth. They are the people for whom a lie is just a more convenient interpretation of reality? The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung once noted that there were only two kinds of people he could not "cure:" schizophrenics and compulsive liars because both create alternative realities.

The second kind of person we cannot bear are those who DO tell the truth. We can't tolerate them because they see right through us. We don't like them because the truth they reveal can be uncomfortable, awkward, harsh and unyielding. It's hard to know which of these two kinds of people offends our sensibilities more: the liar or the truth-teller.

Now let me ask you another question? Can you remember the first time you got in trouble for telling the truth? Can anyone recall perhaps a time when you were a child

and a relative or friend asked you what you thought of their new outfit and you said it was hideous. Or how about when asked by a neighbor what you thought of the brownies they baked and you said they were gross! Chances are, if you expressed your true feelings in these types of situations, you got in trouble later.

Eventually we learn that while we should always tell the truth, we don't always have to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Some call this the art of the "white lie". But whatever you call it, most of us gradually master the complex socialization process that enables us to keep what we're thinking to ourselves.

But truth be told we usually don't want the truth to be told. Once we learn how to avoid those childhood social snafus that resulted in upset parents, scandalized neighbors or relatives, it became easier and easier to back away from the truth.

But not for John the Baptist. It was imperative that he spoke the truth. John was not afraid to offend. In fact he was more afraid of not preaching the word of God truthfully and faithfully than human reprisals. He was well-practiced and well-prepared in the art of giving offense. Even when threatened by the local ruler, John refused to amend his message. Even in prison he never wavered and kept up his offense.

Now Herod Antipas didn't like having his personal life thrown in his face and couldn't admit the truth. He had flagrantly flaunted the Torah-directive that no man may marry his living brother's wife let alone his niece. John the Baptist understood Herod's actions as an offense not against Roman power or the snares of Palestinian politics. John saw Herod's actions as an offense against God. John's moral integrity of telling the truth is what ultimately cost him his head.

So, what we have here is Herod who was intrigued by John's message of repentance yet also offended by John's truth-telling about himself. He felt by imprisoning him he could quiet him and that would be enough. What he underestimated was the deviousness of his wife, Herodias. Her hatred for John was so consuming that she used her own daughter to get her way. The oath Herod swore to give his step daughter "anything" she wanted for her seductive dancing forced his hand. Herod was at odds with himself. He believed John to be a righteous and holy man and didn't deserve death but on the other hand if he didn't give in to his wives and step daughters whims his character and reputation would be further impugned and he couldn't afford to be seen as a weak ruler. So, Herod decided that getting rid of John's offensive voice and silencing the truth was better than facing it.

I think we have to ask ourselves why in the world would Mark give us this story that seems to have little to do with Jesus. Mark gives us this story for the same reason he gives us stories about an imperfect Peter and disciples constantly failing to show us our human frailties and failures. This is not just a story of simple history. Mark was writing to people who were afraid and being pressured into giving an oath of allegiance to Rome. He wanted to show them that people who want to follow Jesus get distracted by other things and expectations that have little to do with living a gospel life or being truthful to the message of Jesus.

Just what is the cost of our discipleship? I wonder if the questions we need to ask ourselves in light of Herod's story are subtler ones. Do I care too much about what other people think of me? Do I value my status, reputation, and popularity more than I do the truth? Am I so bent on conflict-avoidance that I harm others with my passivity? Do I prefer stability and safety more than taking an ethical and moral stand? When I choose

silence for the sake of convenience, whose life becomes expendable? When I decide that justice is too messy, chaotic, or costly for me to pursue, who suffers in the long term? Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact? Am I willing to take the risk and suffer the cost, for others and be true to God?

These are the questions we need to ask ourselves. These are gospel questions the kind that John asked and that Jesus asks of us that makes us squirm and uncomfortable because they question our own preservation and versions of the truth over the gospel truth. What are we willing to risk for the sake of the gospel? How do we live a life that exemplifies gospel teachings?

We can't just live a life that keeps Jesus on the sidelines or believe embracing a passive Christianity is enough. The danger in that is silencing the truth of the gospel that never stops trying to save us.

So, in the end, we must make a personal decision that comes with some degree of risk. Will we risk Jesus call to us to live a life that exemplifies true gospel teachings that calls us to take responsible action which puts the respect and dignity of every human being, love of neighbor and justice and peace at the forefront of our lives. That is living the gospel truthfully. It is as simple, and as difficult, as that. Amen.