

PROPER TEN, PENTECOST 8, YEAR B, JULY 14, 2024

We are all in some stage of disbelief this morning as, those of us who have lived long enough, have witnessed yet another assassination attempt in our country. It is despicable, egregious and a reminder that violence that some people resort to is never the answer. Then we come to church this morning looking for solace and peace and instead we hear a rather gruesome Gospel about the beheading of John the Baptist. Not exactly a Gospel that gives us comfort. However, there are some aspects and more subtle parts of the story that are meaningful.

For instance, there is this part of the story that says, "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." Herod liked to listen to John. There was something compelling about John's message that intrigued Herod that wanted him to know more. This is an interesting tidbit. Herod enjoys listening to a man who point blankly calls him an adulterer? Why is Herod so fascinated by John who holds nothing back and continually hits Herod with the truth about who he is and his actions. I think it's because the truth as sharp, hard-edged, and costly as it often is compels not just Herod but us as well. It draws us in. We live in a world that is overrun with doctored images, fake headlines, exaggerated claims, and blatant lies, that propel people often to do violence because truth has become its victim. Something in us hungers for the truth. We fear it and need it, all at the same time.

I imagine that Herod visits John in his prison cell. After all he's got a captive audience to ask his questions. Perhaps Herod realizes he's stuck between a rock and a hard place. He's lustful for power and yet unsure of what his power has made of him so he asks questions. He probes. He wonders. He hopes. He fears. He learns about Jesus, the one whose sandals John feels unworthy to untie. He asks about all the things John preached about - God, baptism, forgiveness, salvation. He compares the clear authenticity of John's mission and message to his own compromised, convoluted life. And maybe, just maybe, he yearns to be a better person.

But then when the rubber hits the road and the time comes to make a decision of right over wrong, humility over power, integrity over concession, truth over lies, he fails. In the end he cares more about saving face and the lies he's told himself than saving a life. He cannot seem to move from being fascinated with the truth to being a faithful steward of the truth.

In many ways this story is about the testing of one's character, integrity, loyalties, one's mind, heart and soul and God's truth. In other words, what happens in the aftermath of Herod's birthday party is the testing of his commitment to something costlier than his own power. When push comes to shove, his casual fascination with the truth isn't enough to transform him. He remains a hearer of the good news — not a doer.

So what does this aspect of the story teach us? Maybe Herod has something to teach us by way of negative example. The story of John the Baptist's death is meant to shock us out of our complacency. We are called on to confront all violence that appears to arise from a lack of morals, integrity, untruths we see around us. Maybe Herod's story is what happens when we treat the truth too casually. Too neutrally. On the surface, we have to ask ourselves where do our loyalties, our beliefs, our integrity lie? If the end result

of those loyalties is about power and your own creature comforts than they are misguided. The only truth we need to embrace is God's truth.

But I also 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? Do I harm others with my passivity in not speaking out when I should? Do I prefer stability and safety more than transformation?

These are personal questions on the one hand, but very public ones on the other. When I choose silence for the sake of convenience, whose life becomes expendable? When I decide that justice is really about what I think justice should be, who suffers in the long term? Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact?

These aren't good news questions if we mean news that makes us feel good. But they are gospel questions. They're the questions John asked. They're the questions Jesus asks.

These questions should be at the heart of our Christian faith because when we start putting our own comforts, our own prejudices above the good of everyone then we have lost our place. When we believe that violence is the answer then we have lost our integrity, our morals and the very essence of who we are. More often than not it is a fight to live God's truth and not our own. It is a fight to become God's blessing to others.

John the Baptist lived for the truth and he died because of it. I doubt if any of us will ever have to worry about dying for the sake of God's truth. However, those who bring to others the message and the voice of God act like a conscience for others to witness. This of course is the highest ethical calling, to aspire to act ethically, morally spreading God's love in such a way as to bring about a qualitatively better state of life and affairs for the sake of others. But it carries with it the distinct danger that you could lose friends, family, status, etc when you do. Living God's truth is never easy

Christianity is not about knowing about Jesus. It is about knowing God as represented in Jesus. It is about having a relationship with God through Jesus. Our affirmation and allegiance is first and foremost to God's truth which is loving your neighbor as yourself.

We are living in a time of vicious uncivility. Political violence has no place in our faith or our democracy. Yet so many people see those who disagree and those who hold a different point of view then their own as the enemy rather than their neighbor. We all need to grieve violence and the rage that infects so many people to use it indiscriminately and violently. We need to pray for the end of rhetoric that incites rather than deescalates. We need to pray for healing from us vs them mentality which erases our sacred bond as human siblings and God's beloved children.

We have a choice-be like John or be like Herod. Will we be weak like Herod, easily tempted, easily manipulated, who disregarded the truth or will we be strong in our moral convictions and God's truth like John?

As Christians our ethic is determined by the spirit of God's love for everyone working in our lives. Jesus calls us to live a life that exemplifies gospel teachings. So in the end, we must make a personal decision with some degree of risk that best clarifies what God calls us to do. We are called to responsible action that puts the respect and dignity of every human being, love of neighbor, justice and peace and God's truth at the

forefront. To alter one of Martin Luther's little quips: "People must reflect, then act bravely"
It is as simple, and as difficult, as that. May we always side with God's truth. Amen.