

Sermon

Proper 10B July 14, 2024

Mark 6:14-29

Today we have the only story in Mark's gospel that is not directly about, or does not directly point to, Jesus. But just because it's not about Jesus doesn't mean it isn't gospel truth. And in keeping with Mark's overall theme of Jesus confronting the evils and abuse of power with the goodness and holiness of God, this story is full of confrontations and their outcomes.

Even though Jesus isn't part of this gospel passage, I want to start with him. When it comes to Jesus and the gospels, there seems to be two primary points of view. One is that Jesus is a goodie two-shoes preaching love and tolerance while handing out flowers to everyone. The other is a macho Jesus who looks a bit like Rambo and has come to storm the gates of hell, plowing through sin, and crushing all those who oppose him. But if you actually pay attention to the gospel narratives, neither of those are who Jesus actually is.

Yes, Jesus is compassionate and loving, as seen in how he cures the sick, feeds the hungry, and deals with women. But he also has high expectations for his followers. Jesus also takes on the forces of hell and sin, as seen in his encounters with demoniacs and his expectations about how to deal with sin. But his most damning critiques are reserved for religious authorities, hypocrites, and the wealthy, while telling sinners their sins are forgiven and providing second chances.

In short, Jesus embodies the soul of a prophet in speaking out against tyrants and systems of all kinds that harm the vulnerable, while also embodying the love of God to all people, especially those whom society designates as unlovable. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

And why am I talking about Jesus if today's passage is about John? Because what you find in Jesus you will also find in John.

John came to prepare the way of Christ. In the Christian tradition, John is seen as the last great prophet of Israel. In that preparation, he didn't pull any punches when dealing with people. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?"

John also set expectations about proper living. If you have two coats and food, you must share with those who have none. Do not defraud people or extort money by threats or false accusations. John, like Jesus after him, was critical of those in power who used that power for selfish reasons or to continue to oppress those in need. We not only see this when John is preaching at the Jordan, but we see it today as well.

Herod the Great had a massive building program in Judea. He also had a massive ego and was massively paranoid. He executed anyone he saw as a threat to his rule, including his first wife, three sons, and other family members, and Matthew says he was responsible for the slaughter of the innocents.

After his death, his son Herod Antipas became ruler of Galilee. While not as ruthless as his father, this Herod used his power and position to gain favor with Rome, put down disturbances, and marry his brother's former wife - something not allowed by Jewish law.

John was not one to stay quiet, and he denounced Herod for this illicit marriage. He may have denounced him for other things, but only the marriage issue is recorded. With John's growing popularity, Herod had him arrested, hoping to avoid a revolt. Herod's wife, Herodias, seriously disliked John, saw him as a threat, and wanted him dead.

Then, at a birthday party for Herod, his stepdaughter performed a . . . we'll just say . . . an easily R-rated dance that thrilled and excited Herod to the point of offering her half his kingdom. She goes to mom and mom tells her to ask for John's head on a platter. Caving to political expediency, Herod has John executed. And there's some biblical family values for you.

John, like Jesus, was executed by the state for being a problem. And in that is a gospel message for us.

The gospel, and all of scripture for that matter, calls us to union with, and fidelity to, God. This isn't found in putting the Ten Commandments up in schools and government buildings. It isn't found in requiring biblical education in schools. It isn't found in passing laws that are "biblically based." It isn't found in banning books you find offensive. It isn't found in aligning with structures and policies that are decidedly antichrist and proclaiming them Christian. And it isn't found in creating a "Christian-based government."

Adhering to gospel and scriptural values is shown in loving your neighbor. It is shown in feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and welcoming the foreigner. It is shown in speaking for the voiceless and raising up the downtrodden. And, as John and Jesus did, it is shown in speaking out against oppressive systems and tyrants.

Doing that, though, comes with a cost. Jesus said following him will pit families against each other. Following him will leave you nowhere to lay your head. Following him will cost you.

Standing up for the gospel is not about aligning yourself with the politically powerful or creating a system made in our image. But it is about calling out political and religious leaders for hypocrisy, abuse of power, and not caring for those whom God cares for.

When we follow God and Christ's example, we run the risk of ending up like John, or Jesus, or any number of other prophets and martyrs who suffered the wrath of the state.

Today's gospel reminds us that being faithful to God can have serious consequences for us. And in the story of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, the question we must answer is, "To whom will we be loyal." Because one way or another, someone is going to claim your life.

Amen.