

**"A Tragic Tale" – July 15, 2018 – Mark 6:14-29**

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Today's lesson from Mark's gospel is an ugly tale of the misuse of power – involving corruption, exploitation of the weak, fear of losing face, a distorted sense of honor, hypocrisy, manipulation, and violent injustice. In a gospel that is known for its brevity and sense of immediacy in telling the good news of Jesus Christ, Mark devotes an unusual amount of text to tell a story in which Jesus is notably absent. We are right to wonder why Mark would include such a story, one that is told as a flashback of prior events.

Its inclusion in this gospel begs to be seen as more than footnote in history. Mark could have easily brought us up to date with a quick comment regarding John's death while in prison, at the hands of the local tyrant. So it seems this drawn out recounting of the events leading up to John's death serves a purpose greater than mere history. Is it a foreshadowing of the tragedy that awaits Jesus at the hands of the religious and political rulers of the region? Certainly. Does it parallel the events that will take place in Jerusalem where Jesus becomes subject to the cruel whims of the machinations of those in power? Of course. But I think it's even more than that.

So here's the story again. Herod Antipas – one of the sons of Herod the Great that we know from the story of the Magi who went in search of the baby Jesus and who slaughtered all the babies in Bethlehem – his son, Herod Antipas, is the Herod in this story. He longed to be called king, but the Romans gave him a lesser title. He was married to an Arabian princess but dumped her for the wife of his brother, a woman named Herodias. At that time, John the Baptist was actively proclaiming his message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Herod was fascinated by John, but not enough to repent of own misdeeds. John, like the prophets that had come before him, was not afraid to call out those in power, including Herod. Perhaps Herod was impressed by John's passion and unflinching devotion to God, his willingness to speak out against injustice and unrighteousness without fear of reprisal. But Herod's new wife, Herodias, was unimpressed and wanted John gone. Herod was weak and drawn by his own passions to seek his power from worldly sources. But his fascination with and fear of John caused Herod to arrest him rather than kill him outright. Herodias would not be content until John was dead.

On the night of his birthday, Herod held a lavish banquet for his friends and admirers. During the party, his step-daughter came out to dance. Now much has been said about this girl – many choose to implicate her in enticing her step-father with a seductive dance. Yet the Greek word used to describe her indicates a little girl, who quite possibly danced innocently, as young girls often do. Yet whether seductive or innocent, the daughter in this story is nothing more than a pawn in a larger tale of revenge. The girl has no power of her own, she is a victim of a larger system of power and control. As a female and as a child she is at the mercy of the those whose power she can never have. And she is manipulated by her own mother, to be used a tool to achieve dreadful ends.

In response to her dance, Herod flaunts his wealth and power – he is one who has so much, to give away even half would not disrupt his lifestyle. He boasts in front of his peers, agreeing to reward her generously, backing himself into a corner out of which he will find no escape. Herodias jumps on this

opportunity when her daughter comes to ask her, what gift should she demand from her step-father. And without hesitation, the woman, whose own place in a patriarchal society gives her only the power her husband allows her to have, sees the solution to her problem of John the Baptist. She wants his head on platter.

Herod is stuck. He is controlled by his ego, which will not allow him to back down from his previous boast. Saving face among his cronies is worth more than a man's life. And while he is saddened by this request, John is nothing more than a trinket, a cheap toy that brings occasional amusement, but has no worth in his world of power. In Herod's world each human life has variations of worth. And John, though a prophet of Israel, is easily squashed like an annoying insect.

The soldier who is sent to carry out the despicable deed has no say in the matter. He is merely following orders. We don't know his feelings on the subject. He is just one more pawn in the chess game of the powerful. Were he to refuse, his job would be forfeit, available to the next lowly man who has to make a living to support his family, no matter how dirty the work. Someone has to do it.

And without making a grand spectacle of the event, the man known as John the Baptist, whose birth had been foretold by angels, and whose life was spent pointing away from himself to God's Messiah, drew in his last breath, and was slaughtered in the cold quiet of a prison cell. His head, a trophy representing the triumph of injustice in a world in need of a savior.

And I think that is why Mark included this story with all its sordid details. This, my friends, is a portrait of our world. These are our leaders. This is what the misuse of power looks like. They may look different, as will the results – but this is our world. A world of the haves and the have nots. A world of people living all along the margins whose existence is a mere nuisance – a reminder of the so-called annoyances of responsibility and care for those who are less fortunate. They are hungry, overworked, abused, and victimized. Additionally, those on the margins become the scapegoats for all the world's ills. **They** are, not those who hold the power, but they are the reasons why the rest of us can't have "nice things." And they become easy to hate. Or even worse, they become easy to discount and disregard. And their worth is seen as somehow "less than."

Then there are those people whose place wavers somewhere in the middle, who sometimes serve as the pawns to those in power. They are those who witness the injustice but fear for their own heads should they dare to stand up to the powers in control. They adopt a mindset of "dog eat dog" or survival of the fittest – refusing to take the risk of being the voice for the voiceless, for fear of losing the place of minimal comfort to which they have grown accustomed. They become willing to go along with the systems in place. They become complicit. They become blinded, rationalizing, "if I don't do it, someone else will." And unfortunately, they are often right.

Today's lesson from Mark's gospel is tragic, and hearing it makes us uncomfortable. And that's okay. Sometimes we need to be left feeling uncomfortable. We know the ending of the story. We know that Christ has revealed that ending to us, and indeed, IS that ending. But today....today we are reminded that we live in the in-between time. We may know the ultimate end of the story, but today, we are still writing our little piece of it.

