

Pastor Colleen's Sermon of July 12, 2009

Grace, Peace and Mercy be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Ok... I know what you're thinking...

After hearing that gospel lesson for this morning I know you are thinking... WHAT??

THAT's the gospel?? Are you kidding me?

Today's gospel is truly one of the most distressing and depressing of all the gospel stories...

The story is chilling.

There is an innocent man...

imprisoned because he dared to speak the truth...

Then there is a sensuous dancer... a promise made... a vengeful request...

and ultimately cold blooded murder ordered so a King could save face.

It is not one of the happier gospel messages...

Indeed it is downright frightening.

When I read the story earlier in the week I literally looked up and asked,

"and the good news would be???"

As a matter of fact as I was sitting in my office on Wednesday and I overheard Pastor Sharon with her bible study group ask the question, "and where does anyone hear any good news in this text?"

I wanted to yell out of my office...

SPEAK LOUDLY AND CLEARLY PLEASE!!

It takes a bit of digging to find the treasure in this message.

It is what I like to call "an artichoke story"...

An artichoke story is one where the layers have to be picked off one by one in order to get to the heart at its center.

The crux of our gospel story takes place around the fact that Herod Antipas had married his brother Philip's wife.

And John the Baptist publicly scolded Herod.

Now Herod himself tolerated John,

but his wife Herodias seethed with anger and wanted John killed but she had no opportunity.

Then it turned out her chance came through her daughter.

The daughter danced for Herod and he is so overwhelmed by her performance he tells her he will grant her anything she asks, even half of his kingdom.

Herodias seizes the opportunity and tells her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter.

And we hear, *"The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head."*

The story of John's beheading is upsetting on a lot of levels and it has an impact on us.

It snaps us to attention and shakes us from what can sometimes be a complacent faith journey.
 Even the way the story is placed in this Gospel makes a point.
 Before this story is Jesus' calling of the twelve and his sending them into the world with nothing to sustain them but their faith.
 And after the gruesome platter is brought into the banquet,
 The next part of the gospel is the disciples returning to Jesus to report their success.
 It seems that good and successful ministry happens right alongside violent opposition.
 It's enough to make one choose a safer course in life than being a disciple of Christ.

And maybe that leads us to one of the reasons for the story...
 It just might be that some of us who try to follow Christ have been following too safe a course...
 Perhaps we've been sitting in mighty comfortable seats at the banquet,
 so much so that we need this awful story to help us remember how we are following the One whose way was full of danger and whose final destination was a cross.

Another reason behind Mark's inclusion of this grisly tale may be to highlight how John and Jesus' stories constantly overlap.
 John has a message and dedicated disciples;
 Jesus' ministry follows a similar pattern.
 The innocent John is killed by powerful people who are threatened by his truth telling.
 Jesus, too, dies at the hands of anxious political authority.
 Herod knows that John is not deserving of death;
 Pilate tries to derail Jesus' execution.
 John's followers come to take his body to a tomb;
 there is a tomb waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem as well.

The point is not so much that John and Jesus are the same in some ways...
 The greater point is that speaking the truth to those in power leads to the same kind of danger no matter who you are, whether its master or disciple.

Now don't get me wrong.
 I'm not suggesting that we manufacture confrontations to ensure that we are faithful people, although that does happen sometimes.
 But if the only confrontations we've ever engaged in over faith have been about what **other people** are up to, we might be more like Herod than we think.
 For like Herod maybe we are just attracted to the holy but not changed much by the association.

If nothing else, this disturbing story reminds us that it's terribly easy to **dis-member** our faith in order to look good in front of our peers, or at least not risk standing out.
 By the same token, we decapitate what we say we believe in when we compartmentalize it into a Sunday ritual that has little or nothing to do with the rest of our lives.

In other words, sometimes we need to be jolted out of such complacency.

The poet and essayist Kathleen Norris tells a chilling story about a young man named Willie. It seems after rough years working oil rigs, Willie met some drug dealers putting together a new network.

He fell in with them and thought himself lucky to be working with experienced people.

Then one day as he was driving with his new partner outside a particular city, the man suddenly pulled the car onto the side of the road.

He had seen someone driving past in the other direction and was wondering whether to turn around and drive after him.

"I need to kill him," the driver said deliberately,

and he reached down under the seat and pulled out a gun Willie hadn't known was there.

"I need to kill him, but he's with someone and I don't know who, so it'll have to wait."

"This was way over my head," Willie told Norris.

He got out of his new business as soon as possible.

Norris tells Willie's story as a story of salvation.

She writes, "He was glad that he had been able to name something as wrong and walk away from it."

We're glad, too, when we have a clear choice to take a meaningful stand.

But clear choices in life are few,

especially if you spend at least some of your time living in a banquet hall where there is so much power and so much entertainment and so much to eat and drink that the faithful choices can become hard to see—

at least until distant lives have been harmed or even lost and we are somehow involved, if not directly responsible.

The story of John's beheading is shocking,

and it's meant to be

for it is meant to shock us out of complacency in a faith that comes at little or no cost.

Relatively few Christians, thanks be to God, are called to be martyrs.

But all of us who follow Christ are called to confront,

as well as we can,

the wrong we see around us,

and confrontation is never comfortable.

And sometimes doing good and right things does not always protect us from being badly hurt.

However, as the passage from Ephesians tells us,

God has chosen us before the foundation of the world and that,

having sealed us in holy baptism,

God will NEVER let us go!

And finally we have gotten to the heart of the artichoke...

For we are to trust in that knowledge.

We are to trust that even though telling the truth to those in power is difficult...

Even though confrontation is never comfortable...

We are God's beloved children now and forever

And believing in this is what strengthens our faith and allows us
 Like John before us...
 To speak the truth, and to witness to our faith in God.

John the Baptist was called by God to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.
 He lived by the rule of God and **always** pointed the way to Christ.
 And today, even through his gruesome death,
 He continues to point the way to Christ.

John's life was one lived in the light of the truth of God's love.
 He would not let anyone stop him from proclaiming that message.

And he points to Christ who also let no one stop him from proclaiming the message of God's
 love and saving grace.

Today as we are confronted with this disturbing story.
 We have two choices.
 We can just forget it as soon as we leave this place.
 Just file it away with all the other nightmarish stories we hear about.

Or

We can be transformed by this story.
 We can let John's death not be in vain.
 We can become truth tellers in a world that doesn't want to hear the truth.
 We can become God's messengers in a world that tells us God is dead.
 We can continually live our lives as folks who point the way to Christ.

So what are we going to do?
 Are we going to just file this story away...
 Or are we going to become truth tellers for Christ?
 The choice is ours.
 Amen

**May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your
 minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen**