

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."

¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for 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. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Flannery O'Connor wrote, "There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize the moment."

Today's scripture is about a deeply conflicted man - Herod. Consider the tangled web of complicated relationships Herod has to navigate. As king, he the leader of the Jewish people under Roman occupancy. But he's not as good a leader as his father. He has married his brother's wife. John the Baptist has publicly criticized him. People are talking negatively and he knows it. His wife hates John the Baptist for it, she tells him so, and she tells everyone she meets so, which causes friction for him at home. And why doesn't he do something about it? she says. People are talking. And then there is this kind of friendship he has developed with John the Baptist. True, he had arrested John the Baptist and had him bound, but at the same time, he very much wanted to keep him alive. We read that Herod actually liked to listen to what John had to say, even though he was perplexed by him and didn't know quite what to make.

John had chastised Herod for taking his brother's wife. Why shouldn't I? he might say. An honest question for Herod and one for which he's willing to wait for a more detailed answer from this John the Baptist, whom people respect. Respect is all Herod wants. He wants to appear generous and trustworthy as the leader of the Jewish people. He wants to appear strong to his own home. But that's all threatened now because people are talking and it's not good.

You see, that's part of the territory of a public life. Herod knew that anything he did would be closely scrutinized, and there were no easy answers. Nothing he would do could possibly please everyone. He is truly conflicted.

For a while, Herod felt safe to be conflicted. John was locked up, where he couldn't embarrass him, but he could go talk to him anytime he wanted without anybody knowing. But, then came the birthday party, his wife's daughter dancing before him, his promise to give her anything she wants. Whoops! Herod all of a sudden has to choose and his conflict heats up.

You know we are, each of us and all of us, conflicted too. We have our allegiances, our responsibilities, and places in our lives that we want to keep smooth and secure. As individuals, we have a church to support, but also personal lives to finance.

Perhaps there are some pastors out there who are surprised at how political the church can be. As one pastoral voice wrote, "Contemporary church leaders also struggle sometimes like flies caught in a sticky web of congregational politics. Different cohorts in the faith community clash over issues as theologically mundane as the color of carpet in the parlor and as theologically central as the shape of congregational worship."

Stephanie and I recently read a book for pastors entering a new call. It told of one situation where a minister was being watched very closely by most of the congregation to see how he handled one particular difficult situation with an individual in the church. Everyone in the church could see what was going on, and they waited until the minister dealt with the situation in a satisfactory way before granting him full trust as a pastoral leader. A public leader is always under this kind of political scrutiny, even in the church. As Cheryl Briggs Johns says, "A community's perception of how well it's leaders negotiate the settlement issues"...such as carpet and one member or another's particularities... "can bolster or compromise the ability of a pastor or lay leader to minister effectively."

Conflict is difficult, and many leaders squirm when confronted by someone "determined to push an agenda to accomplish a goal they personally hold sacred." Most leaders have given in to demands at some point to save face or keep the peace. This is often giving into a temptation among us "to confuse good spiritual leadership with the ability to control complex situations, confused emotions, and anxious minds." This kind of leadership can actually hurt our ability as a congregation to think more deeply how we should reach out as a church to the needs around us.

Every church needs leaders who can move beyond conflicts about carpet colors, service times, or any particular elements of the worship service. Should we talk about these things? Yes, we should because in these discussions there is richness and an opportunity to see our worship more widely and diversely than we did before. But we have to move from them to discussions about this cross of Jesus that moves us from a vision of the world where everything is about politically playing your cards right to get what you want to a vision where we look at the needs of the community, and how we are called to minister in it. That kind of leadership is difficult to do. Stephanie and I are of course a big part of that leadership here. But we are by no means all of it. There are many people here who are called and gifted to be these kinds of leaders.

Conflict and politics are part of daily life, and unfortunately our life in the church is not exempt. For all leaders, “it is only human to care what people think and want to please those around us by minimizing conflicts.” However, especially as a church, though we need to be able to deal with and move beyond our conflicts, we also need to get beyond the temptation to minimize, control, or ignore conflict. So that’s what I think this scripture text has to say to us as a gathered body.

Herod’s moment of choice is this kind moment in the story. Will he choose to preserve the innocent life, knowing that it will bring political embarrassment? Will he or won’t he choose grace as O’Connor writes of it? It’s a shame that Herod rejects grace, but he’s not the last one in the gospel faced with this dilemma. It becomes a question for every character throughout the gospel.

This kind of moment happens again when Jesus goes before Pilate. Jesus is accused by an angry mob, does not defend himself, and must wait on Pilate to choose. Though his innocence is apparent to Pilate, Pilate chooses to satisfy the crowd.

As I prepared this sermon, I was of course convicted by how often I think it is just easier to satisfy the crowd. Most of our personal lives we are conflicted in one way or another.

Think of the parent whose child throws a temper tantrum in a grocery store. Other shoppers look closely to see if the parent will give in, or administer discipline of some sort, and then of course the discipline will be closely watched and likely judged as both too harsh and too lenient at the same time. Or perhaps the conflict is at work, when you have to explain why a child’s baseball game, or a sick parent, or some other personal issue means you can’t work overtime or take on additional responsibilities. Pre-teens and teenagers often deal with cliques, in-crowds, dumb jocks, pretentious nerds, snobby cheerleaders, boyfriends or girlfriends who play games with your heart. Sometimes perhaps it seems like we never outgrow those social games. Everybody, throughout their life has to navigate questions of who they are and how they should act amidst conflict. While the particularities of Herod’s story might be strange to us, the angst of Herod’s struggle is all too familiar.

The consequences of how we navigate our struggles can be devastating. Politicians make grand promises when running for office, but once the election is over and won, too many of those promises are broken, or impossible to fulfill, and it is the people who get hurt. We heard again last week about the outrage over a new round of corporate bonuses being given to executives of corporations just months after receiving government bailouts, which certainly results in fewer decent paying jobs in this difficult economic time. The battles we fight, literal and figurative, are chosen in the first place, and then shaped everyday by a consideration of the cost and benefit, especially what others will think about our actions.

I think the challenge for us as responsible Christians is to look closely at our personal, community, and national conflicts and reassess our response. The demand the gospel places on us is messy. It might cause Christians to lose their lives, sometimes literally. Many of us don't want to speak out for political action because of such internal conflict.

When we see injustices or various problems in our local community, or even nationally or internationally, when do we speak out? The question of whether or not we will accept grace becomes a question for us also; and the answer is not always easy. We will usually lose the respect of some people when we speak out. If we make a habit of speaking out, we will probably lose some friends. What we need to do is figure out what the gospel asks of us in our lives and go for it whole heartedly.

As one preacher says, "Our affirmation of and allegiance to the truth of the Gospel cannot be a hedge position. It's all or nothing, regardless of the consequences."

There are times when a congregation like ours may choose to take a stand on some injustice. When I visited a church in Jamaica, one weekday, while my class was visiting there, the minister told us about the ministry of their church. Their church had decided that they should always be open to justice issues in the community. One person came to the leaders of their church to voice a concern that the local power company had decided that it needed to turn off the power of those who were behind on the power bill WITHOUT notice. Their policy had been to give notice before, but they decided to change that policy over night. The church decided they should be involved to speak out for these people. And they did. They started a letter writing campaign. Some of the members who were lawyers donated their time and helped those people out. Presumably some of their members worked for the board of that power company. They probably lost those members. But that's conflict and there-in lies that moment of grace that Flannery O'Connor talked about. If there is one thing this story of the beheading of John the Baptist teaches us is that it's really not easy to follow Christ. Is it?

Jesus Christ is the truth. And the truth has consequences. If you follow the truth long enough, at some point you will be caught between doing what God calls you to do and a desire to satisfy the crowd. What will we choose?