

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Text: Mark 6:14-29

Let us pray, Lord Make us a living and persistent sign of your righteousness and your loving kindness. Restore peace to our world and bring wholeness to all your beloved children. Amen

This story has a triangle cast: Herod, his wife Herodias, and John the Baptist. We finally hear the answer to the question we were left with in chapter one, "What happened to John after his arrest?"

History can give us background on this passage. Herod was the son of Herod the Great. As a teenager Herod saw his father have three of his older brothers and his first wife executed for trying to poison him. In the book of Matthew, we hear the story of how Herod the Great ordered the massacre of all male infants in the city of Bethlehem. This is the family Herod grew up in. A family of power, corruption and brutality.

Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great from one of his son's that he had executed. Herod the Great gives his granddaughter to be the wife of Herod Philip, one of his other sons. So, Herodias marries her uncle Philip. She later divorces him in order to become the wife of Herod. Herod divorces his wife so he can marry Herodias.

This is the backdrop for the culture and situation John finds himself in. This passage can be difficult to follow as it is part flashback and part foreshadowing.

The flashback begins in verse 20 when we are told that "*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 is hearing about the things that John does in chapter one of Mark's gospel proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Herod liked to listen to him and he protected him. But then John's truth telling becomes uncomfortable for Herod. John is pointing out to Herod that he is defying the law in Leviticus by marrying his brother's wife. Suddenly this person that Herod liked to listen to was pointing out things in his own life and saying these things were sinful. John is speaking truth to

Herod telling him to repent and ask for forgiveness of his sin. Herod reacts badly. How do we react when someone points out our own failings?

We can listen faithfully and make changes. We can argue and deny. Do we get caught up into our own sin and remain blinded when others try to enlighten us?

How is the reaction different when there is a power differential? Herod, as ruler, has political power that John does not. Does our power blind us even more to our sin? Herod uses his power to silence his critic and has him arrested and put in prison.

Now add to this his wife Herodias who had been nursing this grudge against John and wanting him killed for quite a while, whispering in Herod's ear. Herod cannot bring himself to outright kill John, so he chose a compromise instead to arrest him and put him in prison.

In Mark 1:14 we are told that John is arrested and then Jesus begins to proclaim the good news of God. As John goes to jail, Jesus' public ministry begins. As we arrive in chapter 6, we learn how John's story concluded.

21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee." Herod throws a party. He invites the leaders of the community, his military advisers and local officials.

I can imagine a huge party, everyone is dressed to the nines and food overflowing on the tables. An atmosphere of greed surrounds. Herod wants to impress everyone. Contrast this to John in his prison cell, alone and helpless. *22 When the daughter 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." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."*

This young girl enters and dances a dance that pleases everyone. Herod is dazzled then shows off for his guests by offering something extravagant and makes a reckless promise. Wanting to please her mother, she runs to ask her what to choose. In a

powerful scheming family, a family who saw themselves above the law, Herodias has a sudden opportunity. How many times in the months previous had she encouraged Herod to have John killed because she feared him?

And Herodias, who could have asked for half the kingdom, instead, with no hesitation, chooses to take the life of the man exposing her sin. She thinks that by removing John, the one naming her sin, she will remove the guilt of the sin. But it is God's Word that is the conviction of her sin & John is the vessel.

The ultimate source is God. How often have we tried to run away, to bury, to ignore the guilt of our own sin? We know it is there and yet we are so blinded by our sin that we don't realize the blessings we lose when we are short sighted. We lose the freedom that comes with confession and repentance. We allow our sin to short change the blessings that God abundantly bestows on us. Herodias foregoes the abundance of half a kingdom to murder a righteous prophet.

25 Immediately the daughter rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." At once she says, no more of this waiting around, right now! *26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.* It doesn't help John that Herod is deeply grieved. Caught in their trap and driven by fear, Herod doesn't want to lose face in front of all his guests, the high and mighty of Galilee.

Even though he regards John to be a righteous and holy man and someone he likes to listen to, he decides he cannot default on his oath and orders to have John killed. John's fate rests with Herod who is manipulated by others.

27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. The soldier went and beheaded John in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

John has no idea what is about to happen. Having languished in prison for so long, suddenly a soldier shows up and everything is over. When the soldier returns he doesn't give John's head to Herod the ruler, instead he gives it directly to the girl who requested it.

All of this flashback in verses 20-29 takes place before our passage begins. *16 But when Herod*

heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." We pause here to ask, "What is the it that Herod heard?" Immediately before this story in Mark's Gospel is when Jesus sends out the disciples two by two and gives them authority.

Herod hears of the apostles making their journey about the country, proclaiming everywhere the glories of Jesus and working miracles in his name. The name of Jesus is on everyone's lips and Herod is troubled.

As our passage ends Herod's guilty conscience immediately causes him to recall John. Herod sees both John and Jesus as prophetic voices. In Herod's fear that Jesus is John returned from the dead, we can hear the hope for us, and for all those oppressed, that all the prophets killed through the ages are alive in Jesus.

In the reading today from the book of Amos we heard the Lord call Amos to prophesy. For the Lord is holding a plumb line in the midst of Israel and finds they are not measuring up to their covenantal duties.

A plumb line is a cord like this weighted with lead that is used in building to check that vertical structures are true. It is used symbolically to refer to the divine standard against which God, the builder of his people, tests and judges us.

Amos was an ordinary farmer. Amaziah, the northern king's high priest, tried to use his power to silence him. God's word of judgment, that came through Amos, conflicted with the king's court prophet.

These stories are filled with people who have power. How we handle power says everything about who we are. We all have power whether we acknowledge it or not. Often people describe themselves as the hands and feet or the hands and heart of Jesus.

We are leaning in to Jesus' power when we do this. The question is how will we use it? Our words and actions have the ability to lift others up or crush them down. We are called to recognize and use our power rooted in God's love.

As John and Amos proclaimed to the people, they were drawn to them for a word of cleansing and a reason for hope. The rulers of the day were fearful and found this threatening.

These stories are filled with fear. When we believe and live into God's promises we are released

from our lives being governed by fear. This release, from a fear that controls us, brings freedom. This freedom gives us the courage to seek God's truth for us and our neighbors and our world.

This freedom allows us to move beyond thinking we are the center, to point beyond ourselves, to reflect Christ in the world in the needs and care of others. To love as we have been loved. How do we align our biased truth and self-centered agendas with God's truth and God's mission?

Everyone has their own agenda when they tell a story or try to make a point. Whether it be those on the left or those on the right or those in the middle of our political spectrum. Everyone has points they make that they feel justifies their agenda and their truth.

Justifications of what is best for ourselves and families, what is best for others, what is best for the environment or for the common good. Our justifications drive our agendas and our words. The challenge is to align, by using the plumb line of God's Word, to align us with God's truth. We do this in community, listening and talking with each other.

Another way to see if our agendas are driven by God's truth is to look at the consequences of our agendas. Do these consequences line up with God's Word, Jesus? Power, without regard for the other, is destructive.

Consequences can have life threatening effects as the stories of John and Jesus show us. The truth may set you free, but it can also get you arrested and killed.

I've heard people say that the church shouldn't get involved in politics. Yet these stories shows us how Amos and John were called to speak truth to power. We know that Jesus spoke truth to power. There is a relationship between the bearers of God's message and the powers that be, both in our local community, our country and our world. We should, as Amos and John did, hold a plumb line to the rhetoric we hear in our present-day lives.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy, it is not easy to be a voice that is contrary to society and government, nowhere are we promised of a rose garden. We can look to the past and see tragic consequences when men in power were not held to this straight and true line.

Just as Amos and John were called, we all are called to exercise our prophetic voice in our

community and the public forum. We are called to witness to justice in company with them.

But are we willing to examine where our self-interest silences truthful critique of our own religious institutions and government? We should practice self-reflection and rigorous self-examination holding a plumb line of God's judgment up to our own lives. Taking account of our own words and actions, can we examine our willingness, or unwillingness, to live lives that reflect God's Word of justice and mercy?

As we do this we can be thankful for God's abundant grace. God's grace saves me when I ask if my own plumb line is straight and true? We can remember God's intimate and persistent presence in our lives.

We may have different views but our common belief in welcoming others as Christ himself is the first step on the path toward a united Christianity. As people of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ we can agree on the dignity of all God's beloved children.

Do I look at the immigrant as my brother or sister, or a child of God? Do I look at the ICE agent as my brother or sister? Do I look at my elected officials as children of God?

Here at Bethel in our months of transition we have been holding a plumb line up, to measure us and our vision of Walking with Jesus. Our work here feels good. Necessary changes and additions have been accomplished, yet there is more to do as we are always reforming.

Let's ask ourselves, if in our worshiping community are we so comfortable that we are immune to hearing a prophetic voice holding a plumb line? Amos is not a professional prophet, he is an outsider. An outsider can give us a fresh voice and a new perspective. We are often biased in the agendas and viewpoints we are committed to. We can be insiders so much that we cannot hear the voice that calls for change.

The head of John the Baptist on a platter is a searing image of our cruel and unjust world. As with most martyrs, John's message has survived his death and centuries later we continue to hear his voice. John felt called to challenge the unjust political structure of his day.

Measuring by God's plumb line is a standard that withstands the test of time and can be used

throughout all the years.

In the verses following these in the sixth chapter of Mark we hear of another banquet. Jesus hosts a banquet for thousands of **un**influential people with little to offer except five loaves and two fish. This feast will find no greed and no fear. All will be filled with leftovers beyond belief.

John held a plumb line up to Herod and it showed he wasn't straight and true. Amos uses the image of a plumb line to call the people of God into account to repair the injustices in their land.

Speaking the truth in love, Jesus reminds us that he has come to suffer, die and rise for the sake of the world.

We are called to speak truth to power but always through the lens of God's Word as a plumb line to guide us. Jesus calls us to engage in ministry and action. The authority of our ability to speak truth to power must be rooted in God's call on our lives. This leads us to promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society and the world. It is our responsibility to work together to repair the economic injustices and the structural and system injustices that perpetuate social inequalities.

When measured against the plumb line of God's judgment do we fulfill our moral obligations to God? May God's plumb line, straight, define our measure true, and justice right and peace pervade this world our whole life through. Amen