

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2021 Yr B
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Mark 6:14-29

Today's Gospel is one that comes with a lot of baggage. For preachers, it is one that seems dramatically out of sync with the season of Pentecost – one in which the Holy Spirit or divine guidance seems to be totally lacking. Where are the instructions to go out and do the work of God? Where are the spirit filled followers spreading the Good News? In fact, where is Jesus?

The beheading of John the Baptist is poignant and chilling at the same time. Poignant because here we have the brutal murder of a devout man who has seen, in the instance of his baptizing Jesus, the world that is and is to come. Chilling because the story lacks any redeeming quality on its face, and Jesus is noticeably absent.

Whether we know the backstory or not, we know this scene. Salome's dance of the seven veils is a popular subject for artists' brush, along with the gruesome depiction of John's head on a platter. The gospel passage ends so abruptly that we're not quite sure what to say. It is too horrible to face and make sense of. "When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb." If this sentence makes you think of Jesus's death, then you're on to something.

In its own way, this scene mirrors the life and death of Jesus. John always seemed to me a pre-form of Jesus, the canary in the coal mine – look to John and you will be automatically led to Jesus. So, when John's death is so brutally depicted, we know that Jesus will die in a similarly brutal fashion.

But just as we know that John's death presaged Jesus's death, we also know that they died for the same reason – living out their truth.

For John, it was his vocal opposition to King Herod Antipas's adulterous marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias, an act John considered a moral outrage. Herodias was married and divorced Herod Antipas's brother. So we have John speaking truth to the powers that be about their moral failings and Herodias was not happy about being dissected so publicly.

Similarly, we know that Jesus will be tried and executed, hung on the cross, for speaking truth to power. But speaking this truth to power is not the danger. What is truly dangerous and heartbreaking is the fact that in both cases, those who heard the truth of Good News shut their ears and hearts from hearing it.

The reality is that God's truth is compelling and enduring because it centers on love, justice, wholeness, community and relationships. Whenever we speak to that, there will always be resistance because the common world view is that those things don't necessarily serve our

individual interests, and when they don't serve our individual interests, then they can be seen as a threat.

But God reminds us that in Jesus, rejected, scorned and murdered, that the truth will out. The values that we cherish most, that give the most life, must be brought to the forefront, chosen and demanded again and again. That is true faith.

Sometimes our world seems to be going in the total opposite direction. Now, more than ever, we hold up our individuality as the key valuation benchmark. What can you and this society do for me? What can I get out of this or that, and don't forget about my feelings – it's the only thing that matters! I think this focus on the self, the ego, has actually made our world smaller. We are fearful of stepping outside of ourselves to serve a greater good, we are at a loss of how to address the myriad injustices of the world, and what we look like on the outside and how we appear to others creates barriers to being our true, vulnerable selves primed for relationships.

But in all this uncertainty and inward focus, there was a bit of good news last week. The Public Policy Research Institute conducted a study on the American religious landscape in 2020. While people who don't affiliate themselves with religion, the NONES, are still the majority, there was some surprising growth in other areas. For the last thirty years, Non-Evangelical Mainline Protestant churches (of which the Episcopal Church is part) experienced steep decline, with a decrease from 19% in 2007 to 13% in 2016 of the total population. However, this number has started to move upwards again and we now find that 16% of the population declare their affiliation with Non-Evangelical Protestant denominations, a 3% increase in the last 3 years.

Now, there are many reasons why this may be so, and the number is still precariously low, but I think some of this has to do with the great effort churches like the Episcopal Church has put into finding ways to be the church that we need to guide us in time such as this. And it starts at the grassroots level. Right here at St. Michaels, in the three years that I have been here, I have seen the ways you have opened up to each other and to the community with care and concern, love and inclusion. I know deep in my heart that you all are part of the reason why this upward trend is happening.

That's because you all are dedicated to the message. You speak the truth of love, compassion, justice and community, and people are listening. Don't stop. There will be folks who will never hear the truth of God's love that you proclaim, and they will seek to silence your efforts, but know that there are even more people who need to hear such words and see such acts of love.

We might not see the percentage of churchgoers rise significantly in our generation, or even the next, but that's not what matters. The only thing that truly matters is that we are called to live out and speak God's love and truth into the world until the day we pass from it. Don't give up. Amen.

