

“Truth”
Mark 6:14-29
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
July 15, 2018
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Mark 6:14-29 (NRSV)

The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’^[a] name had become known. Some were^[b] saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵ But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷ For 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^[c] had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed;^[d] and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias^[e] 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.” ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” ²⁵ Immediately 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.” ²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s^[f] head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Today’s Scripture reading is not one of my favorites.

I don’t like the characters very much.

The main focus ISN’T Jesus, but a political figure and his family.

Their inclusion, in the middle of Mark, reminds his readers of OT figures like martyred prophets and the scheming “bad” girl who’s bent on destroying that prophet.

It also points forward: John the Baptist’s disciples give their teacher’s body a decent burial. How will Jesus’ disciples care for his remains?

So, since folks wiser than me have included this passage in the lectionary for something we can ask: What on earth are we supposed to learn from today’s gospel reading?

At first brush, don't you have to wonder what kind of spiritual fuel can we possibly get from the grisly account of John the Baptist having his head chopped off? It's an unpleasant historical detail.

But, don't you agree, sometimes God's Word calls for patient study and reflection.

His Word always yields results when we trust the Holy Spirit to make us wiser.

I like to "flesh out" characters in a drama.

Sometimes they give us hints that can point us to THE point.

We've heard about John the Baptist; especially around the days of Jesus' early ministry.

John is Jesus' cousin.

I picture him finishing up his lunch of locusts and honey, removing his animal hide "tunic" and leaning people into the muddy waters of the Jordan River.

I can envision him preaching about "someone else" coming who is greater than he is, which reminds us that he was a prophet, a spokesman of God.

John the Baptist spoke the truth without fear.

And in today's reading his life comes to "a head" (pardon the pun) without the favor of the ruling family in his region, the Herod clan.

Now, remember, THIS Herod isn't the Herod we hear about at Christmas time (that's his dad.)

And, he's not really a king, but a governor who is "managing" Galilee for the Romans.

This Herod dismissed his first wife so that he could marry the third character in today's gospel, Herodias.

She was, as John the Baptist reminded them, ACTUALLY Herod's sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Phillip.

It's like an episode of All My Children!

And last, but certainly not least, the girl who danced was Herodias' daughter from her previous marriage, Salome.

So we've got:

- John, the prophet;
- Herod, the governor;
- his new wife, Herodias;
- and Salome, her daughter.

We could say, though, that there's one more character.
It's the unseen character called 'Truth'.

See, I knew the lectionary included this story for a reason.

It's Truth who's the main character in today's gospel.

It's Truth that sets the story in motion.

And, it's Truth that we are going to focus on here today.

Ultimately, when we talk about the truth, it's Jesus himself who we should think of.

He *is* the Truth.

He points that out when he uses an "I am" statement in John's gospel: "*I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life...*"

So let's take a closer look at the role that Truth plays in this gruesome, dramatic story.

The first thing we should note is this: **the truth hurts**.

Don't we know THAT from experience?

Criticism is always painful; but it's even more so when we know it's true.

Herodias got her feelings hurt by the truth that John the Baptist spoke plainly and clearly. He called her marital status out!

And, as a result, she lashed out and wants him dead.

She had it in for him, because the truth hurt.

The truth also got to Herod, but in a different way.

For Herod, the truth frightened and disturbed him.

He resented John's accusation, just as much as Herodias.

But, Herod was drawn to John's *overall* message (remember Herod was probably a Jew.)

He didn't accept John's message, but it did raise his fears to NOT want John killed. The truth just continued to irritate him.

Eventually, he did execute John, (he did keep his word to his step-daughter) but, we can be sure that the truth continued to bother Herod...probably even more.

When he heard of Jesus, he immediately feared that John had come back to life.

Now, a little paranoid, everything reminded him of John.

Every birthday party - he pictured John.

Every time a girl danced - he thought of John;

Every time a servant brought his dinner on a platter - he saw John's head!

The truth hurts.

And, we're hurt by it, too.

The Truth for us though, should be a loving, healing hurt, designed to save us. Still hurt? Yep, but God's Word, His Truth, is to correct us.

It exposes what's wrong, cuts through our excuses, and points out sin so that we can correct it.

If we're honest, we know that it's a fact that God's word won't be able to comfort us properly until it has hurt us, healed us, properly.

The same goes for worship.

We want to come here for comfort and to be lifted up.

But, BEING HONEST, we may also need worship to hurt us; correct us by pointing out where we've come up short.

Too often we worry about our worship being inspiring and entertaining.

But God is more concerned that our worship is truthful, which means that sometimes worship may need to be a place where we are confronted, even hurt (convicted in our hearts), by the truth.

And don't forget that as Christians, we're called to be truthful with one another.

So, let today be the day, especially if you've ever been (and who of us hasn't) less than truthful, let today be the day when you speak the truth, to whomever you're nudged to be honest with.

As you do, the God of truth will be with you.

The truth hurts.

But, a second thing is that: **the truth suffers**.

Have you ever heard the saying "the truth is the first casualty of war?"

Truth sure suffered in the gospel.

John spoke the truth and suffered for it.

If he'd spoken only part of the truth – maybe a slap on the wrist.

But, he spoke the whole truth and lost his head.

John here is really a foreshadowing of Jesus.

John had an inkling that Jesus' ministry would be one of suffering truth.

We know that Jesus is also known as the Man of Sorrows and the Suffering Servant.

Why? Because he **IS** the Truth.

It is the same today.

We pray about Christians who suffer ridicule and scorn. That's persecution.

Some even go to martyrdom!

JUST the name of Jesus is mocked, WITH HATRED, more than any other religion or idea.

Why?

Because it's true.

And, praise God, because Jesus, the Truth, is alive and well.

Jesus explained why the truth attracts such hatred in John's gospel (3:19-21) when he says,

"Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."

That's why the truth suffers.
And it'll be the same for us.
If we live by the truth, we will, to some degree, suffer.

Some of us may experience exclusion because of Truth.
Others of us have daily temptation to live by standards that are less than true.

Jesus said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."*

The truth hurts and the truth suffers.

But there's one more point for today.

Today's reading is a sad account of John the Baptist that is part of a larger story.

In the bigger story, the **truth is vindicated**.

Truth has the last laugh.

Truth rises from the dead.

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, suffered and died because the world hates the truth.

But we know (will you say the Easter morning greeting with me)

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Truth, Dear Ones, will not suffer forever!

One day, John the Baptist will rise and be re-united (not only with his PHYSICAL head) but with THE head, with Christ.

All Untruth will be exposed and Truth will be rewarded.

Listen: Every true word, every true deed, anything we have done for the sake of The Truth, whether it was attacked or ignored, will receive its acknowledgement.

All of us, as we live **in** the truth and live **for** the truth, will receive the great reward that God has given to his Son.

Hear this and CLAIM IT: As surely as Christ rose from the dead, Truth will be justified.

That's because our God is faithful and true to every one of us.

We can count on that every single thing he promises us in His Word will be fulfilled.

God can't do otherwise.

God's love for us, His forgiveness of our sins, His protection and promise of new life are promises He will fulfil for us, because He is faithful and true.

Oh, how we need to remember that.

God's grace is bigger and broader and better than the untruth of our sin. And consequently, (even bigger and better) even more true than the inevitability of our dying is the resurrection we will have into Eternal Life.

So with John the Baptist, and all of God's people, let us rejoice in the truth, trust in the truth and live in the truth, who is Christ: the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Amen!