

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 6:14-29**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona**

Violence and fear. Hatred and resentment. Vindictiveness and Malevolence. Why is this story in our lectionary? Why did Mark include this grotesque account in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ? Where is the Good News in today's Gospel message? It is not by accident that this lesson begins by speaking the holy name of Jesus and referencing his disciples. This is an act of resistance on the part of the author to counteract the terror that is associated with the name Herod. From King Herod the Great to Herod Antipas the Tetrarch, the name has conjured up traumatic memories of violence, oppression, and evil for generations. Today we continue to be reminded how evil can seep into ordinary life and become part of the culture we create for ourselves and our descendants.

As Mark's audience, we have been invited to attend Herod's birthday party as distant observers, or through our imaginations, as one of the characters in this gathering. We may resist playing the role of one character over another, or we may relish the chance to experience the power and agency a certain character brings to the celebration. Herod, the adulterous king who arrests and kills an innocent man supposedly to maintain his honor. Herodias, his manipulative wife, who uses her daughter to carry out her vindictive desires. The daughter who is learning how to use her position to make her way, and get her way, in whatever way will bring her acceptance and power. The courtiers, officers, and other leaders who are perpetrators of a toxic culture of violence, terror, and oppression. The executioner who was just doing his job. Regardless of role we choose or the one that is assigned

to us, we find that our character is complicit in a scene that can best be described as a glimpse of hell on earth.

Again, we ask ourselves, where is the Good News in this Gospel message? Evil has infiltrated this party and the wider society, but there are glimpses of the kingdom of God breaking in. Jesus' name had become known throughout Galilee because he was bringing healing and hope to people who had felt ignored or invisible. Like his cousin John, Jesus was attracting followers because of his prophetic teaching and compassionate acts. Herod finds similarities between Jesus' prophetic ministry and John's. Although Herod at one time was intrigued by the prophetic witness of John, now he superstitiously thinks that the baptizer has come back to avenge his death through the prophetic witness of Jesus. Paranoia is beginning to take hold of Herod, and this does not bode well for those over whom he has power. But Herod is also astute in recognizing the parallel characteristics of the ministries of John and Jesus even though he does not yet know the ultimate end to this story. For now, according to Mark, John's disciples are living into the hope of the good news by showing care and compassion for the decapitated body of their leader. Later, after he is arrested, tortured, and crucified, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus will give Jesus a decent burial, and some of the women will come to honor him by anointing his body. All of these actions reveal a glimmer of good news for the world, a glimmer of hope for humanity.

The actions that took place during Herod's birthday party are in stark contrast with those that took place afterwards. Actions often speak louder than words and convey the nature and use of personal and collective power. Power can be selfishly used to fuel greed and fear, or it can be graciously used in service of others to express dignity and respect. But words have their own place in manifesting the

world that God intends. Words matter, and so does truth telling. Truth telling about the abuse of power, and truth telling about the responsibilities of power. Truth telling about ourselves, and truth telling about God. As disciples, we are called to spread the Good News, in thought, word and deed. And sometimes this takes the uncomfortable form of truth telling. Repudiating past teachings, taking actions to amend wrongful practices and dismantle evil systems, and making reparation for injustices that have been buried with the truth.

Last Sunday afternoon, two of my Native American friends reached out to me in their own ways to share how they have felt retraumatized by the recent reports that hundreds of children's bodies had been found buried near Indian boarding schools in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The schools were operated by representatives of the Catholic church, but we know that other denominations, including the Episcopal Church, operated Indian boarding schools in our own country. We have yet to determine the full extent of the atrocities inflicted by Christian leaders, but over time we have learned about the lasting impacts of intergenerational trauma carried forward into our own lives. It is painful to share parts of our histories that reveal deep trauma, but truth telling is part of the healing process. We as a people of faith must develop meaningful relationships with our Native neighbors, so that there are opportunities for truth telling in safe spaces, so that all of us may work toward healing, reconciliation, and reparation. Together, as a people of faith, we can demonstrate our allyship with Native peoples and be a hedge of protection against evil for one another in this and future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tucsonweekly.com/TheRange/archives/2021/07/01/enduring-trauma-arizonas-indigenous-boarding-schools-will-be-investigated-interior-announces>

Allyship with our marginalized and oppressed neighbors is one of the ways we live out Christian discipleship. I believe that each one of us has a story to tell about how the Spirit has strengthened us with courage and resilience to defend the dignity of other human beings; stories about how God has graced us with earthly angels to offer us respect and protection. Every Thursday, several of us gather in a prayer circle to reflect on the Gospel reading for the following Sunday. Last week, our discussion led us to share experiences that we had about truth telling in the face of wrongdoing. Each of us in our own way has stood up, spoken out, or taken some other form of action to repent of the “evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, or the evil done on our behalf.”<sup>2</sup> We can choose to not laugh at inappropriate jokes; we can take steps to dismantle platforms that others use to denigrate individuals or groups of people; we can stand in solidarity with people who have been marginalized or oppressed for generations. In doing so, we can be prophetic witnesses of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

On May 25, 2020, an ordinary woman documented in real time, in broad daylight, in an ordinary American neighborhood, the killing of one human being by another human being. When 17-year-old Darnella Frazier woke up that morning, she did not set out to defend the dignity of an ordinary stranger. But when she saw George Floyd being pressed into the pavement with a knee on his neck, she knew it was wrong and she used every bit of courage and the ordinary technology she had to proclaim to the world that this evil act, and all other acts of violence and oppression that are intricately woven into the fabric of our culture, must be stopped.

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<sup>2</sup> *Enriching Our Worship 1: Supplemental Liturgical Materials prepared by The Standing Liturgical Commission 1997*, New York: NY: Church Publishing, Inc. (1998), 19.

Participants in institutionalized evil must be held accountable, and future evil acts must be prevented.

Having John be decapitated and displaying his head on a platter for all to see is not that different than what some of our nation's forbearers did. Posting the heads of Native peoples in strategic locations after a violent invasion is not that different than leaving lynched bodies hanging from trees for the entire community to see. It is not that much different than watching decades of newsclips showing marginalized people being tracked down by official and unofficial vigilantes and killed with guns, and the weaponry of their own bodies. But the good news is that we are not that different than the ordinary disciples who honored John the baptizer by giving his body a decent burial. We are not that different than the devoted followers of Jesus who risked their lives and reputations to honor his death on the cross, and bear witness to his resurrection through our lives.

Rooted in God's love, we can speak the truth and act with mercy; we can use our power for the benefit of others; we can be witnesses for justice and be agents of grace. For although the way of the world can be sinful and evil, that is not the whole story. Jesus comes to lift us up out of the muck and mire we have created, and helps us realize that there is more to this life than we can ask for or imagine. By His grace we can be witness to the power of God's love for the whole world.

And, thank God, that is more than a glimpse of good news.

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