

Year B Proper 15 Again, It is About Choice Mark 6:14-29

A couple of sermons ago, I mentioned that Mark likes to use the “sandwich” technique. He places one story within another in order that the stories will shed light on each other. He did this with the healing of the unnamed hemorrhaging woman sandwiched in between the start and the finish of the story of his healing of Jairus’ daughter. Mark has used this technique again here: He has sandwiched the story of the beheading of John the Baptist in between the start and the finish of the story of Jesus sending out his disciples to share the good news of God’s kingdom. We know this sandwiching means that the two stories are meant to be together, are meant to shed light on each other – the fascinating story of John’s death is not simply to pass the time until the disciples return triumphantly to Jesus. But what does this gruesome story tell us about the mission of Jesus?

The placement of the story of John’s death is not a coincidence. It really could have been slipped in by Mark in any number of places including a few chapters earlier when Mark told us John had been arrested. But Mark chooses to place the beheading of John here. It is our heads up that smooth sailing is not in the forecast for Jesus and his followers.

This highly politically charged story of John’s controversial death comes immediately after Jesus’ mission has also hit some turbulent seas. The details leading to John’s beheading follow on the heels of a significant rejection of Jesus by the hometown folk in Nazareth. Then, as he instructs his disciples before sending them out, Jesus prepares them to expect that they, too, will experience some rejection.

John had gotten himself into political hot water – arrested by Herod for not keeping quiet about his disapproval of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife, Herodias. Mark closely links John’s mission with Jesus’ mission when he tells us that Herod believes Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. John the Baptist – the messenger of God – and Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, would certainly share the same political views in terms of what behaviours would be acceptable or not acceptable in God’s kingdom. John’s arrest and murder, after disturbing the political ‘powers that be’, is a signal to us from Mark that Jesus is heading down that same path. Like John, Jesus is going to be a thorn in the side of Israel’s political and religious elite. Jesus has already turned many Pharisees against him by healing on the Sabbath – they’re already plotting to take his life and we’re just getting started on Mark’s Gospel.

Placing the story of John’s beheading here, as Jesus and his disciples are expanding their mission to spread the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom for all who will turn back to God’s ways, placing the story here is Mark’s way of letting us know that Jesus – and his disciples – are in this with their eyes wide open. They know the message they proclaim and the life they are choosing to live is taking them down a dangerous road. The life of complete equality, justice, love, and compassion for everyone that Jesus is proclaiming simply does not mesh with the lives of luxury and power that the wealthy are living at the expense of the “others”. It’s a life they don’t want to give up and pushing against the status quo, speaking out for God’s ways, lands Jesus before Pilate. Like Herod, Pilate is a powerful man who ends up trapped by the power structure he functions within. Herod, the king, must put to death a man he calls righteous and holy, a man he knows speaks the truth. Herod must put John to death to save face, to retain the

status and power of his position. Pilate must order the crucifixion of a man he knows is innocent, not deserving death – let alone such a cruel and shameful death. Pilate must crucify Jesus or look weak and disloyal to the emperor.

John's tragic death, which happens because of the way the power of this world works, points us to the tragic death of another innocent man at the hands of the worldly powers. In today's story we see both the way of the world and the way of God's kingdom. John – as God's messenger – shows us the steadfastness of God and of life in God's kingdom. He is steadfast to the way of love, of truth, and of justice – proclaiming God's truth in the face of great opposition. Like Jesus' disciples – and, of course, like Jesus himself, John proclaimed God's message to those who did not want to hear it. He cried out for the repentance of people who resisted his call.

Herod shows us the way of the world, reveling in power yet trapped by it at the same time. Herod uses his power to throw a lavish birthday party for himself, propping himself up for all of the courtiers, and officers, and leaders of Galilee to come and express their admiration of him, to be impressed by his wealth and power. Mark masterfully sets us up to instinctively know there is something wrong with the ways of the world Herod represents. We flinch a little when we hear that it is Herod's daughter who is dancing before him. We flinch again when we realize Herod is exposing his daughter to the less than pristine gazes of a roomful of older men. We flinch yet again when we hear that the men and Herod are immensely pleased by his young daughter's dancing. Yet, before our very eyes, the wrongness of the world appears to prevail – by the end of the story, John's head is on a platter.

We learn that sometimes the world's power does not give way to the life-giving message of God's kingdom. People who hold the power in this world want to hold on to it at all costs. As we have learned before, and will learn again, our God invites us to live in God's kingdom but it is our choice. We have the choice of the world's ways put before us in the person of Herod and we have the choice of God's ways set before us in Jesus and in John. We choose which one to follow. Our repulsion at the story of Herod giving the order to execute John perhaps makes it seem like this choice is an easy one. But, truth be told, we all have a little bit of Herod in us. We are attracted by the comfortable feelings of security that worldly wealth and privilege provide us. We like to be admired by others and we like it when people admire our possessions. The problem with this is what we see in Herod. He admires and respects John. He enjoys hearing John's message of the good news of God's kingdom and he believes John to be speaking the truth. But, when faced with the choice, Herod allows the world's ways to win out over God's ways despite the fact that he knows what he is doing is wrong and he is deeply grieved. In that moment, Herod chooses the easier path – the way of the world – and we see where that leads. It leads to death. It leads to injustice in the murder of an innocent man. It leads to inner torment.

Because we live in this world, we face the constant struggle between God's ways and the world's ways. We work to choose God's ways, to place God's ways first over those of the world. Thankfully, our struggles aren't as dramatic as the one Herod faced today. But they can be and, for many people, they are. Many people get snared by the world's ways, and for example, amass massive amounts of credit card debt as they try to live as though they had more of the world's wealth and status than they actually do. People with power often become corrupted by

that power and engage in questionable business practices, some start fraud schemes, embezzling schemes to get more of what they already have. Some people try to cope with the pressure and stress of the world with drugs, alcohol, and other means, usually resulting in a downward spiral, involved with people they shouldn't be involved with. They become victims of the world and they create more victims.

And so, even as we struggle with our little inner Herods, striving to follow the way Jesus sets before us, we are called to reveal that way of life, to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, to all others still snared by the world. It is not easy to live a life that goes against the way society thinks and it is not easy to convince others to choose that life – to convince ourselves and others to place God and God's ways in first place over the money and possessions and ways of being in which we are enmeshed and in which we find security. It is especially difficult when that seems to be the losing side – the world's ways seem to be winning. But, by placing John's beheading here, closely connecting it to Jesus' mission when Jesus' mission has hit a snag, Mark is pointing us toward the end, toward the big win. Like John, Jesus pushes against the wrongful ways of the powers of this world and calls us to push with him. As in John's death, the powers of the world seem to prevail over Jesus...But they do not. Jesus wins. And *that* is the side we are called to choose.