

July 12, 2009

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 9 (Proper 10b)**

Mark 6:14-29

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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## HEROD

King Herod Antipas seems to be one of those people who probably didn't sleep very well after he brought about the beheading of John the Baptist. He would really have liked the whole business of his brutality to be put to rest. Now every time his subjects wondered about Jesus, John the Baptizer raised his ugly head (in a manner of speaking) as they asked whether John might not have been raised from the dead. It was probably guilt about what he had done that he thought about when he woke up in the darkest hours of the night. It might have been John that occupied his thoughts as he tossed and turned trying to sort out a way that could make this terrible thing better or at least neutral in his life and his psyche. And there really isn't going to be anything that is going to make the past better for him. What he can do is sort out what happened, why he got himself in the position he did, why he chose to have John beheaded and what he can do to make sure that he is never in such a position again.

History does not tell us a lot about Herod Antipas. He inherited oversight of the territories of Galilee and Perea from his father Herod the Great. He carried out some building projects that have become archeologically significant, including parts of Tiberias. His first wife was the result of one of those political arrangements so beloved of the powerful. Her name Phasaelis who was the daughter of a King called Aretas IV of Nabataea, a land roughly between Judea and Egypt. We know that this Herod divorced Phasaelis so that he could marry Herodias, who was married to his own brother at the time. The gospels tell us that John the Baptist preached against this arrangement rather vociferously and that his sermons did not sit well with the second Mrs. Antipas. (Hard to imagine, I know. But there you go.)

So Herod Antipas was a believer in getting what he wanted and not letting much, if anything, stand in his way. Apparently however he had some measure of conscience (or something like it) operating, at least where the good opinion of his second family was concerned. Maybe he saw himself as acting just like every other minor potentate in the matter of his marriages. At the same time however he seemed to want those around him to have a good opinion of him and that may be what got him into the terrible position that kept him awake at night.

Herod probably felt 'stuck'. Indeed he was stuck if his goal was to keep everyone happy. He appeared to have no good option once he had hoisted himself

on his own petard. He was busy showing off for his courtiers and officers when he asked his daughter, also called Herodias, to dance for them at a banquet. Flush with good feelings and doubtless some fermented fruit of the vine, he promised the girl what ever she would ask “even half of my kingdom.” When her scheming mother, who did not like John or the fact that her husband liked to listen to him saw an opportunity to bring about his death, Herod thought to himself that “out of regard for his oaths and for the guests he did not want to refuse what his daughter asked of him.” And there it is: the root of many if not all those occasions when we feel stuck or trapped or limited or constrained – our desire that everyone around us be happy with us and our choices.

If you are part of that tiny and select group who have never felt stuck or trapped in life then count your blessings. But everyone else can learn something about God’s desires for us by considering Herod Antipas and the terrible pickle he found himself in when he imagined that he had no choice but to commit what amounted to public murder. Did he really not have a choice? Would it have been so bad to stand up to his wife or teach his daughter that he would not accede to such a malicious and venal request? Is it possible that some of his courtiers and officers would have applauded had he rescinded his oath to his daughter? Might he not have slept better at night if he had risked their criticism and risked his marriage, and risked his daughter’s esteem for him, and risked being perceived as weak by letting John live?

When we feel stuck in life, faced with no good options, God knows, we always and without exception, have choices that we can make. They may not seem very palatable on the face of it and will often mean that we risk the esteem or good opinion of someone about whom we care. The thing is that our networks of friends and family constitute a system or perhaps more than one system and these systems or networks of relationship will always try and keep things the way they are, --will always resist change. When we make a choice in those times where we suspect we are stuck or constrained, part of what we don’t want to face is the ways in which the system will try and pull us back into line. Perhaps Herodias would have said emasculating things to Antipas or run off and taken their daughter with her. Perhaps the officers would see opportunity for a coup or the courtiers might smirk without apparent fear of retribution. Maybe people would be a little slower to obey Herod’s commands or not quite get around to carrying out his wishes. All of these things would constitute sabotage for his decision to act in a new and dignified and moral way in the management of his kingdom. And he would need to work through these things without resorting to his old ways of arbitrary violence. If he could do that, he would find that the whole system would begin to reform itself toward his new vision.

So if you feel stuck in regard to some pattern of relationships in your family, for example, or perhaps at work, consider what might happen if you made a decision to act in some way that you decide is the best for you and ultimately for everybody, even knowing that you are not going to get immediate approval or

support. Think about what it might be like if those things that constrain you were not barriers to choice. We always have a choice in life.

The most radical example of choice in the face of seeming constraint that I know comes from a man called Victor Frankl. Frankl was a psychiatrist who was imprisoned at Auschwitz and survived to tell about it. He wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. The first half of the book is his –almost clinical– observations of life and death in the camps. One of those observations is that some people went to their deaths in the gas ovens long dead and others chose to create meaning by facing death with courage and even defiance. Certainly they did not avoid death. Yes they were faced with every imaginable constraint in prison. But stripped of clothes, hair, teeth, family, name, food and anything else that might be considered necessary to be considered human, they were not stripped of choice as to how they would face death. And so were able to exercise their God given freedom as judgment and condemnation on any captor who was paying attention and perhaps make a gift to those with whom they were dying as a sign of God's love in the midst of and in the face of real constraint.

Brothers and sisters this is one of the hardest lessons we have to learn in the life of faith and that is that we really are free, --free to make the choice to claim ourselves and the life we have been given over against all those instincts that we imagine constrain us but are in reality our desire to be liked and to avoid difficult or unpleasant consequences of our choices.

The promise and hope of making the difficult choice is that in the end we will be able to sleep at night and perhaps a cycle of violence and bad feeling can be broken as we choose to become the people we were created to be; people made by love for love, of infinite value as a result of that truth even in the face of certain death.

As ever, let's enjoy a time of silence for prayer as we respond to the gospel...