

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

Mark 6:14-29

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 11, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 6, verses 14 through 29. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 6, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He 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 it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter 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 to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This has to be one of the saddest stories in the Bible, and not just because a good man died. In the end, John the Baptist comes out better than anyone else in the story. But it's especially sad because it's a series of compounding sin. That is, each sin is followed by another, and it's like they multiply the damage of the previous sins. The people in this passage just seem miserable all the way around.

Think about this. I'll give you a multiple choice question. Who would you rather be: John the Baptist, Herod, Herodias, or Herodias' daughter? Pick one of those characters. Who would you

rather be? I'd rather be John the Baptist, and he's the guy that dies! Despite their high place in society, the other people just seem so miserable.

If Herod seems like a messed up guy, that's because he was. The entire Herodian family was messed up. They were vindictive, adulterous, violent, and narcissistic. It was a messed up mess. Unfortunately, we have to dig into their dirt a little bit to understand the fullness of what's going on here. So we'll have a brief little history lesson.

The Herod mentioned in this passage is not the same Herod who was king when Jesus was born. That Herod was this Herod's father. He was called Herod the Great. He was great in some ways, but also really terrible in other ways. We'll start with him.

Herod the Great was a puppet ruler for Rome. Rome controlled pretty much everything at the time, and they set Herod the Great as the King of Judea. His crowning achievement was that he funded the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem, although the work wasn't finished until long after his death. Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born, so he's the one mentioned in *The Gospel of Matthew* when the magi come from the east looking for the Christ. So he's also the one who ordered all the male children in Bethlehem two years and under to be killed (Matt. 2:16). As horrifying as that episode was, it was very much in line with Herod the Great's character. Out of paranoia, he executed one of his wives, and later two of his sons. He also had another son who was executed by someone else for trying to murder him. Herod the Great had many children by many different wives. He was violent. He was power hungry. And he was probably a little bit crazy. He died shortly after the birth of Jesus.

His territory was divided among some of his children. Two of those children were Philip and Antipas, who were half-brothers. Those are the two mentioned in this passage. And Herodias, the woman in question here was their half-niece. That is, she was the daughter of one of their other half-brothers who had been executed by their father. And they both married her. First Philip married her, and then she left Philip to marry Herod Antipas, the Herod in this story.

So all of that means that Herod Antipas married his half-niece who was also his half-brother's wife. And then this daughter of Herodias who danced at Herod Antipas' birthday party would have been, at the same time, his great half-niece, and his half-niece, and his step-daughter ... I think. The family tree is a little difficult to understand. It has lines going in all sorts of directions, many of them in directions they're not supposed to go. Again, these people had some issues. They were vindictive, adulterous, murderous, narcissistic, and power hungry. Eventually someone will make a TV show out of them, but I'm not sure the world is ready for it quite yet.

John the Baptist ended up in their violent and vindictive crosshairs because he was bold enough to speak truth to power. He had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (6:18). There are a couple things to observe here. First, John didn't merely say this to Herod once. The kind of verb used here indicates that John was continually saying this. Second, notice that John was telling the authority what is not lawful. John had no political power. He had popular opinion on his side; the people held him to be a prophet. But the people were not voters like we are today. It's not like John could run a media campaign against Herod to get him unelected. The only thing John could do was speak the truth, hoping Herod would recognize that there is a greater authority, higher than himself, higher than the Roman senate, and higher than Caesar, and repent.

You should expect your pastor do to this too. It's part of the pastoral call. St. Paul says to Timothy, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort,

with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Reproof and rebuke are part of the pastoral call. We don’t enjoy this. Anyone who does enjoy it shouldn’t be a pastor. But it needs to be done for the sake of the unrepentant, and for the sake of the congregation. You should expect that, if you are persisting in some sin, or if you have sinned against a brother in some way, that I will come to you privately and encourage you to repent. And it would be a huge help to both of us if you think about this beforehand. Consider now how you would respond if that ever happens. Will you listen? Or will you walk away.

To be honest with you, most people walk away. They either quit going to church, or they just go somewhere else. Unfortunately, in our society, it’s too easy to just find a different church, one that suits your desires. And most pastors enable this. It kind of bothers me, because I am not one of those pastors. Some of you know this. If you came here from another church, especially one nearby, I probably asked you some questions about that church and why you left. It’s not because I’m suspicious of you, but because I want to make sure it was for good reason. And in many cases it was for good reason. But occasionally I have advised a person to go back to their previous congregation and work it out. I know there are other pastors who do this, but not many, and this is a massive problem in the Church today. It’s not good for the person who walks away, because they don’t repent. It’s not good for the congregation that gets left, because they lose a body part. And it’s not even good for the new congregation, because the sins follow the person there. So consider now what you will do if we ever have that difficult conversation. I really hope you react better than Herod did.

Herod did not listen to John. He was beholden to someone else, Herodias, the wife he should not have had. She held a grudge against John and wanted to kill him (6:19). It’s interesting that Herod actually kind of liked John. He knew “that he was a righteous and holy man” (6:20). Mark says that when Herod heard John, “He was greatly perplexed.” Or we could say that Herod was at a loss of what to do. He was conflicted of whether to listen to his wife or listen to this prophet. But he heard John gladly. And again, this is the kind of verb that means Herod was continually hearing him gladly. It wasn’t just one time that Herod heard John, but he actually enjoyed hearing him. But he did not listen. He kept his unlawful wife next to him, and he kept John in prison.

One of the ways to evaluate Herod’s actions is by playing a little game called, “Which Commandments?” You count up how many of the Ten Commandments are at play in this story. And you get a bonus point if you can identify one commandment that is really central to the whole thing. Are you ready to play? The First Commandment is always part of it, because all sin is a rebellion against God’s authority. So we can check off the First Commandment right away. That’s one point. The next one is the Tenth Commandment. That’s the one that says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” Herod certainly did that. That’s two points. Then we get to the very obvious ones. The Sixth Commandment. That’s the one that has to do with adultery. There’s plenty of that in this text. Three points. The Fifth Commandment has to do with murder. Herod ordered the execution of an innocent man, so that’s four points. But there’s at least one more, and this is the big one for Herod. It’s the Third Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” This is the one that has to do with gladly hearing God’s Word. That’s the point of the Sabbath. Herod liked to hear John, but he didn’t receive John’s rebuke. When the Word of God called him to repentance, he refused. And this is the sin that made all the difference. Because of this sin, they continued in an unlawful marriage, and Herod eventually became a murderer, along with Herodias and her daughter. The sin that really compounded

everything was Herod's refusal to accept God's Word. If Herod repents and seeks God's forgiveness, then it's all wiped away. But he did not. That's what made this a five-point sin, and you get six points if you identified the Third Commandment as the main one.

So let's talk about the birthday party. That's where the sin compounds. This was a most shameful event. If you're wondering if there was something untoward about Herodias' daughter dancing at this party, the answer is "yes." Jews didn't really celebrate their birthdays back then. Birthday parties were more of a Gentile thing, and the activity of this party was very Gentile in nature. It was a "men only" kind of party. The only women present were there for entertainment. We see this when the daughter of Herodias has to go out of the party to talk to her mother and then come back in. It was that kind of party. A bit of marital advice for you husbands out there: don't ever throw a birthday party for yourself in which you don't invite your wife. That's just a really horrible idea.

And Herod's step-daughter /half-niece /great half-niece danced, and she pleased Herod and his guests (6:21). So Herod made a really stupid vow. He offered to give this girl whatever she wanted, even up to half his kingdom (6:22-23). Now Herod was probably operating with impaired judgment at this point.

The girl goes out and asks her mother what she should ask for, and it's interesting to see the way she relays the request back to Herod. Herodias asks for the head of John the Baptist, so the idea comes from her, but the daughter adds the part about delivering it on a platter. So she's just as cruel as her mother. And when you think about it, it's really weird that the daughter would want any part of this, because John was the guy trying to keep her parents together. But for some reason, she shared her mother's bloodthirst, so she asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Now, a bit of practical advice for you: If a king ever offers to give you whatever you want, up to half his kingdom, you know what you should ask for? Half of his kingdom. This will probably never come up in your life, but if it does, you're welcome.

Now Herod, when he receives this request, has a choice. He made a vow to this girl, so he paints himself into a corner where it doesn't seem like he has a choice, but he always has a choice. The choice is between killing John the Baptist or breaking his vow. It's a matter of honor for Herod, because he makes this vow at a party in front of all his nobles, the military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee (6:21). What will he do? It's a sin to break a vow. But it's a bigger sin to kill a prophet. Mark says, "Because of his oaths *and his guests* he did not want to break his word to her" (6:26). If it was simply a matter of breaking a vow to the girl, he probably would have done it. His wife, Herodias, wanted John dead, but he continually denied her. But when he makes a foolish vow in front of his guests, he can either sacrifice his reputation, or he can sacrifice a man he knows to be righteous and holy. Herod chooses the greater of two evils. And in this act, we see his weakness. He wants to be a strong ruler. He fancies himself an important person. But he is not strong enough to do the right thing. When a ruler cares more about saving face or maintaining his power, he is not really powerful at all, but weak.

There's a contrast in the gospels between the rulers of this world and the true king of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ. Both Herod here, and Pontius Pilate later, are too weak to do the right thing. Herod executes John because he cares what his friends think. Later, when the rulers of the Jews bring Jesus before Pilate, he orders the execution, even though he knows Jesus is innocent.

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And he does it because he fears an uprising from the people. In both cases, Herod and Pilate are the authorities in charge, but they are beholden to others, and this makes them too weak to do the right thing. Justice takes a back seat to their position of authority. But in so doing, they really sacrifice their authority. It's ironic. In an effort to maintain control, they are controlled by others. Their desire for power leaves them weak.

They stand in stark contrast to Jesus, who is the true king of heaven and earth. Jesus doesn't care at all what people think. Their opinion doesn't threaten his position. So he associates with the poor and the sick. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. And he is criticized for this, but he doesn't care. It doesn't threaten his authority. They can even take his life from him. In fact, Jesus lays it down of his own accord. And this doesn't hurt Jesus' position of authority. In fact, it establishes him as the king of heaven and earth, because he also has authority to take his life up again (John 10:18).

And because Jesus has this authority, John was able to be faithful, even unto death. As a preacher of God's Word, John wielded an authority greater than that of Herod. And he knew it. That's why he could say to the ruler of Galilee, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Like Jesus, John also did not care what people thought. He didn't even care what Herod thought or what Herod might do to him. John was beholden to the Word of God. He knew that God's Law is higher than any law Herod might enact. And he entrusted his life to the God who had given the divine Law. John was beheaded because he was beholden to God's authority, and by that same authority, John was also saved. He entrusted his soul to the God who raises the dead. And so he was faithful unto death.

John's head was severed from his body. But eventually, Herod died too. And today history remembers John as a principled and faithful man of God, while we remember Herod Antipas as a coward. But more importantly, John died in the faith. As for Herod, we don't really know if he ever came to repentance. But John, dying in the faith, possesses the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead and eternal life in Jesus' eternal kingdom.

Where does your hope lie? This world is fading away. The power it offers is temporary at best. The treasures are vanity. And the respect of others is meaningless if it is not based on virtue. Rather, trust in the king who has all authority in heaven and earth. You don't have to care what others think, because whatever they may do to you cannot take away the sure and certain promise of Jesus Christ. He will be faithful to you unto death. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.