



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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July 12, 2015

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:14-29

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“And Justice for All”

Although this story from the Gospel according to Mark is our lectionary text this week, I doubt that too many preachers will be preaching on it. Like two pastor friends of mine with whom I had lunch last week, one will preach on Psalm 24 (the earth is the Lord's and all that is therein) – on the beauty of creation, and another will preach on the Samuel text that has David dancing before the Lord. Both will be light hearted sermons. I decided to struggle with the challenge of taking this text head on and trying to find in it a prophetic word of grace for all of you. Because this story is an important one in the Gospel message. Though unpleasant, is a story we need to hear.

John the Baptist was a bold preacher. He preached repentance, he spoke harshly to the Pharisees, but he crossed a dangerous line when he preached truth to power. John the Baptist would have probably been safe if he had not crossed that line and instead had stuck to baptisms. But he didn't.

The main character in this story, Herod Antipas, is the same Herod we will hear about later at the trial of Jesus, the son of Herod the Great. Herod had divorced his wife, a Nabataen princess to marry his brother, Phillip's, wife, Herodias, and John called him out on it. But Herod didn't want his public image tarnished by this wild prophet, John. So he conveniently put John away in prison where he couldn't continue his smear campaign. He put John in prison but he never intended to kill him. Herod actually had respect for this prophet. While he had no intention of repenting of his actions, we get the impression that he may

have felt a twinge of moral conviction nonetheless. He knew his actions were immoral. He just chose to deny rather than change.

It may seem that John, in confronting the powerful Herod with a word of truth is being judgmental, at best. But in another sense John was offering Herod a word of grace. Grace can shake us out of our denial and send us to our knees in repentance. Grace can turn the hardest heart around and bring justice for all.

In the movie, Selma, we see Martin Luther King confronting the most powerful person in the country, Lyndon Johnson. Johnson tries to reason with King. He tries to bargain for something less than what King is asking for – Voting Rights Legislation. But King does not back down. He is persistent. By holding out for what he knows is right, King is offering Johnson a word of grace. Johnson knows that he has the power to make justice happen if only he is not afraid to choose the high ground. And King is trying to focus Johnson's eyes on this fact. Of course, with both Herod and Johnson, saving face often trumps the spiritual gift of making the moral decision.

Last year I read about a man who ended his life by setting himself on fire as his way of speaking truth to power. When I read about him I promised myself that at the appropriate time I would tell his story so that his death would not have been in vain. This is a photo of the Rev. Charles Moore, a retired Methodist minister who watched the activity of the Klu Klux Klan as he was growing up in a small Texas town. The things he saw never left him even when he left that town. He earned many degrees and studying at Harvard Divinity School among others. He traveled to Africa, India, and the Middle East where he served the poorest of the poor in slums. Then he returned to Texas and pastored Grace Methodist Church in Austin until his retirement. At Grace Rev. Moore made sure that the doors were open to all people. During his nearly 80 years of life Rev. Moore led Methodists in protest marches against injustice, helped organize the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, and worked tirelessly to end racism. In the note he left behind on June 23 of last year, Rev. Moore explained that he was quite sane, but that he felt the need for social justice for all people was so great as to require him to make his life count for something. So I am telling you his story, not because I agree that ending a life is the way to effect change, I don't, but I do believe the actions of this man's life were the way that he effected change. Rev. Moore, in his note, said that he would much rather go on living, enjoying his wife and grandchildren, but that he hoped his death would perhaps inspire some to higher service. As tragic as this story is, I hope he was right.

In his death Rev. Moore offered all of us a bit of grace. John the Baptist also died a horrific death. If the shock of such horror can cause us to examine our own actions and our own participation in injustice to others, then these horrific deaths will not have been in vain. If their lives can stir us to stand up to the powerful institutions that seem to make all the rules and call all the shots then their deaths will not have been in vain.

Religion isn't just a safe hobby we engage in. Maybe our desire to "fit in" and not make a fuss keeps us from ever speaking truth to power like John did. But there have been Christians throughout history who inspire us to do more. When Jews in Nazi Germany began to disappear, few Christians ever questioned what was happening to them, yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer organized the Confessing Church and stood up for justice. When slavery was a way of life and economic prosperity rested on the continuation of slave holding, William Wilberforce and John Newton, John Brown and Lucretia Mott, stood up for justice. During the 19th century when children in this country were forced to labor in dangerous situations, Lewis Hine and Mother Jones stood up for justice.

We see injustice all around us in our world today. The news is full of stories about innocent people who are shot down in shopping malls and theatres and even in their own church Bible studies. The rich and powerful disparage the marginalized, calling them useless criminals. Fifty years after the voting rights legislation and even with the election of an Afro American President, racism is still with us. We see it in the criminal justice system, in local law enforcement, and right here in our own community. And we don't have to go very far to see a city in the throes of economic failure and devastation. We have become a country where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and nobody says a word about it. We throw a crumb of charity and think we have done all we can. We ravage our environment with no thought of what we are doing to generations yet unborn, concerned only with our own immediate comfort. Our youth are dying of drug addiction in record numbers and we throw them into prison where they continue to use drugs, but where we no longer have to deal with the problem. We send jobs overseas rather than pay our workers a fair wage and even those fortunate enough to graduate from college often find themselves unemployed. We refuse to tax the rich so that we can find the resources to bring about justice for all.

I'm not speaking here of the noble goals of our forefathers, set out in our constitution. I am speaking of the justice that Christ came to earth to bring. We sometimes think that Christ came just to save each of us individually from our sin and to promise us eternal life. He did come for this. But Jesus also came to change

the way the world was operating during the days when he walked this earth. And it wasn't that different than it is now. He came to bring justice to places where injustice created pain and suffering for God's people every day. He came to make the mountains low and the valleys high, he came to speak truth to power. And if our intention is to follow Jesus then we need to follow through on God's plan. Otherwise our religion is just a safe hobby.

John the Baptist was fascinating because he was not afraid to live on the margins. He was not afraid to hold that plumb line that Amos speaks of to remind the powerful that God levels the playing field. Injustice is not supposed to be the normal state of our culture. There is an alternative. Despite his message to Herod we are told in this scripture passage that Herod liked to listen to John. John perplexed Herod, but he liked to listen to him. We often underestimate the humanity of the powerful. We often underestimate the vulnerability of the powerful. We demonize the powerful and then take our seat as the victims, content to accept the ways of the world as unchangeable. But that is not what Jesus did and it is not what Jesus taught us to do. Jesus also confronted the powerful with words they would rather not hear. He made them think about things they probably had not thought about before in ways they had probably never imagined thinking about them. That is the kind of wrestling that grace provokes. Jesus knew that if a word of truth was spoken to the powerful that word would be filled with grace. Whether we are the listener or the prophet, the truth of Jesus' words and of John's resonates in our souls calling us to a new vision of justice. They are words of hope in a sometimes hopeless world. They are powerful words that can change our world by changing our behavior, one person at a time, until we do achieve justice for all.