

NEVER TURN AWAY
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The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
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“When [Herod] heard him, he was greatly perplexed; yet he liked to listen to him” (Mark 6:20).

In this particularly grisly story, we encounter a figure – King Herod – who stands in for the powers and principalities with which the church is often in conflict. The terrible story of John the Baptist’s beheading is told after Herod hears of the success of the mission of the twelve disciples that we heard about in last week’s Gospel lesson. Herod reflects that Jesus’ disciples are so powerful because Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead – that is, that Jesus has John’s spirit. This tells us that Herod is still deeply distressed by the execution of John, the story of which is now told. At the emotional heart of the story is Herod’s *perplexity* about John. The word translated as “perplexed” is the Greek *aporeo* – “to be at a loss about something.” (Bock, *Mark*, p. 211) Herod was conflicted; John had been critical of Herod, yet Herod knew him to be a holy man, and as the text tells us, “liked to listen to him.”

This is one of the texts in the New Testament that has a very modern ring to it from a psychological point of view. Herod’s state of *aporeo* – his perplexity, his being at a loss – would give any psychoanalyst a field day. Herod was clearly torn about John well before he was faced with keeping the terrible promise he had made to Salome. (She is not named in Mark’s text, but we know her name from other sources.) The bottom line is this: Herod’s best self knew that John was a man who spoke the truth with holiness and integrity, but his investment in influence and power prevented him from making the choices he knew to be right. The fact that he was conflicted, as psychoanalysis holds, tells us that there was at least the *potential* for change in Herod; but he chose to follow his lesser self, not his better self.

What allowed him to do this? We could answer this in several ways. But I think one good candidate is right in the text: again, Herod “liked to listen” to John. The sense of the text is quite clear. Herod had significant familiarity with John – he had listened to him speak many times; in fact, he was in the habit of listening to him. My sense has always been that he had continued to listen to John speak even during his imprisonment, perhaps bringing him up from his prison cell into the palace chambers. Herod was *comforting himself* by listening to John. He could kid himself into thinking that he was in some way serious about John’s message. This allowed Herod to be in a degree of denial about the choices he had made in his life: his illegal marriage for one (the thing John had confronted him about directly) but more broadly his investment in his own power and influence.

The way in which Herod was ruled by this investment comes horribly front and center when he is faced with keeping his promise to Salome. Picture the room full of rich and powerful dinner guests, who have been entertained by her, and have heard Herod’s grand promise to her. When she makes her terrible request, despite becoming “deeply grieved,” (Mark 6:26) Herod cannot face the shame he would have felt if he had withdrawn his oaths and promises. His relationships with the powerful—and his own political role—*ruled him*. He ordered a man’s horrible death rather than turning away from the choices that ruled him.

I'm reminded of the scene in *Godfather III* after Michael Corleone has made his confession to Archbishop Gilday and is describing it to his sister Connie:

Michael: "I made confession, Connie. I confessed my sins."

Connie: "Why Michael, that's not like you. You don't have to confess your sins to a stranger."

Michael: "It was the man. A good man. A true priest. He changed things."

Michael Corleone was like Herod: he was entirely able to recognize and appreciate holiness. But in the end, he could not allow this to change the choices he made in his own life.

So – what are our takeaways from the story of Herod and John the Baptist? Perhaps the most obvious one is that we in the church are called to be John the Baptist in the face of the powers of this world that are invested in preserving the structures of oppression in our society: to call out racist policies wherever we see them, to stand for the rights and dignity of the LGBTQ community, to declare that industries that foster climate change are instruments of evil. We need to be a prophetic voice regardless of the consequences to us.

But ... we also need to ask, are we always the prophetic figure in the story? Or are we more like Herod, taking comfort in listening, speaking some of the right words, perhaps even taking some of the right actions – but in the end not really changing our lives? Where have you – where have I – where have we, really cast our lots? Are we ready to stare down and fight evil, even if it disrupts our own comfort and offends our family and friends?

As we noted at the beginning of the sermon, today's Gospel is indeed a grisly story. But it is risky to turn away too quickly from the terrible image of the severed head of John the Baptist on a platter. We must confront the image and allow this confrontation to lead us to look at the grisly images in our world today: people of color murdered in cold blood by police, Native Alaskan seacoast villages destroyed by climate change, the battered bodies of Asian Americans attacked in broad daylight in our cities. Choosing to align with evil will always result in grisly images.

The choice is really this: will we look, or will we turn away? Only if we look, and keep looking, will we make the hard, holy choices that keep us true to our best selves, and to the One who died for us, whose best self was His only self.