

Pentecost 7b – Mark 6.14-29 (07.11.2021)  
VA Synod / Trinity, Newport News

Wow, y'all! That is quite the doozy of a gospel text, huh?! The beheading of John the baptizer. Not exactly the kind of story that is often included in the children's bible storybooks that you might have read.

And really, that might be part of the reason why this narrative presents such a hard message for us. Because this text – and so many other challenging texts – speak of the difficulty and danger that is part of God's mission in the world. These texts speak of the challenge and danger that is part of our call to be part of God's mission in world.

When we really look at narratives like the one for today – and others all throughout the gospels and the rest of the bible – we see just how hard it really is to follow Jesus. Yes, the presence of Christ in our lives is, at least in part, about our spiritual well-being, but the message of the gospel also upends conventional social and political structures in a way that can result in exile, rejection, and even death.

That is part of what we learn today, from the beheading of John the baptizer.  
So, let's look at this narrative and put some context around what is going on.

Our gospel begins with: *King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.* The "it" that King Herod heard about was the disciples going about preaching, casting out demons, anointing people with oil, curing the sick, and proclaiming that all should repent.

This info was included in the gospel reading from last Sunday, when Jesus sent the disciples out – two by two – to go out to the villages teaching and preaching. Part of Jesus’ instructions for the disciples was the reminder that some would welcome them and others would refuse to hear them. But they should just keep preaching, teaching, and healing. That is the mission of God – regardless of whether people want to hear it or not, regardless of whether people reject the preacher or not. God’s mission is healing, curing the sick, casting out demons, calling people to repent – to turn from their sinful ways and to live in God’s ways of love, grace, mercy, peace, hope, forgiveness, justice.

Not everybody wants to hear that message. Some refuse to hear. Some reject those who are sent. God’s mission can be challenging for some. God’s mission can be challenging for us.

Jesus sent the disciples out into the villages just after he himself has been back to his hometown – where the community of people that he grew up with rejected him. They were offended and scandalized by his words.

So, what is it about Jesus that so scandalized people? What was it about Jesus that made Herod Antipas so concerned when he heard about Jesus’ disciples and when Jesus’ name became known to him? What is so threatening about the gospel?

Well, if we go back just *one* chapter in Mark, we hear about Jesus healing a man who had been possessed by a legion of demons. This man had been restrained by chains and shackles. He was

howling and bruising himself with stones. The people around him were so afraid of him that he lived among the tombs.

OK, now imagine that for a moment. Really pause for a moment. Do you know people whom others are so afraid of that they hold them in chains, in shackles, imprisoning them away from others? Holding them in cells or detention centers, as if left for dead? Do we know of people in our world today whom we fear so much that we lock them away? I can think of many – too many – instances of people being locked away because of my fear.

So, rest there for a moment and imagine yourself in this community with the man who has been chained up. And Jesus comes to him, sets him free, releases him from his bonds, frees him from his affliction, enabling this man – this child of God, this one whom I fear – to return to community, to return to my community. The people in this man's community were terrified by Jesus' action. They were so afraid that they begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

That is the kind of mission that God is on in our world – to release people from bondage. To set the prisoners free. To proclaim forgiveness and wholeness and hope to *all* people. Jesus upends the social norms by talking to and assisting the one whom everyone else was so afraid of that they locked him up. Again, think about our world. Who are the people whom society locks away because others are afraid? Who are people whom we might see and be afraid of? That we might want to see chained up, shut away in a cell somewhere? Those are the very people that Jesus has come to set free!

Does it make you uncomfortable? I'll admit that God's mission of freedom, release, hope, and forgiveness makes me a little uncomfortable. It challenges me. God makes me rethink the ways of the world I live in. God's mission makes me rethink the structures that we have put in place to maintain order – structures which are often held up by our fear: of others, of outsiders, of strangers, of those who are different. But God's mission is a mission of beloved community, a mission of hope, a mission of breaking down our unjust systems so that ALL people can live in wholeness and abundant life.

Kind of makes me start to realize why people weren't such big fans of Jesus. Let's not forget, he is eventually killed by the powers that be.

And if that one story is not enough to make us pause and be uncomfortable. The very next acts of Jesus – as recorded in Mark's gospel – are to heal a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and to raise a little girl from the dead. These are hopeful, miraculous stories, yes. But they are also really, really challenging and difficult.

A child had died, and Jesus had the power to bring her back to life simply by taking her hand. Jesus has power over death itself. Talk about upending the ways of this world! I don't know about you, but that would seriously freak me out! Would I be in awe, yes, I hope so. But really, I would be freaked out and probably a bit afraid.

And Jesus also healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. Her hemorrhaging would have left her not only in pain and discomfort – every single day! – but also it would have left her isolated

from community – every single day, looked upon as ritually unclean, without any financial resources because she'd spent all of her money seeking a cure, seen as having no value in a society that valued women mostly because they birthed children. This woman was so removed from the community. And Jesus healed her, restoring her to health, to wholeness, to security. Calling her daughter, giving her worth and value, and praising her faith.

Jesus healed this woman, whom the community had rejected. Again, think about those whom we know who may be living with chronic illness, who may be living in financial distress, who may be thought of as unclean or unworthy or without value. Just rest there for a moment. I know I can think of people like this woman – people whom we, whom I, have not thought of as worthy. People whom society abandons as unworthy and without value.

Those are precisely the people whom Jesus heals, whom Jesus cures, whom Jesus touches, whom Jesus restores to abundant life, whom Jesus restores to community. People whom Jesus restores to our communities! To your community and neighborhood and family. To my community and neighborhood and family.

And y'all, to be honest – that often makes us uncomfortable. Our social structures set up pretty clear lines of who is welcome and who is not. We have often unspoken but nonetheless well-known rules about who is valuable and why. But God's mission upends all of our unjust rules and castes and classes. God's mission breaks down our dividing walls and instead creates one new humanity, one reconciled

body of Christ. Because of Jesus we are no longer strangers and foreigners – we are ALL citizens with the saints.

This is the mission of God. And it is really and truly threatening, shaking and rebuilding the very foundation of our lives and of our societies.

Whether we want to hear it or not, the mission of God has very real implications for our whole lives – spiritually, physically, socially, politically, communally. The message of the gospel is challenging and difficult and dangerous.

Jesus knew this. The disciples knew this. John the baptizer knew this.

In the middle of the ongoing narrative of the disciples out and about preaching, we hear an interruption in the story in the form of a flashback. King Herod Antipas (who is the son of Herod the Great, who was king when Jesus was born) has heard about Jesus and all the trouble and danger he is stirring up. And Herod is concerned. Could Jesus be John the baptizer raised from the dead?! No, it can't be! Because Herod remembers how John died – beheaded while in prison, with his head brought out on a platter and given to Herod's daughter and wife as a gift.

What?! WHY would Herod do that?! Why was John such a threat that he had to be killed so brutally?

Why? Because John had the boldness to speak truth to power. John was a righteous man – even Herod admits that. And John had admonished Herod for marrying his brother's wife, which broke the law and covenant established by God with God's people. And not only was *Herod* threatened by John, but Herod's wife was also threatened by John's prophetic words, by John speaking truth to power.

John's prophetic witness to the commands of God cost him his life.

It's got to make us think:

John went out and preached and was handed over to death.

Jesus went out and preached and is already being rejected. He too will be handed over to death.

Jesus has sent the disciples out to preach....and one has to wonder....

And let's not forget, y'all, *WE* are disciples of Jesus sent out to preach. One has to wonder....

The message of the gospel is not unicorns and butterflies and fireworks.

The message of the gospel is the powerful truth of God's love for all humanity made known to us all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus's life was a proclamation and witness to the love of God which breaks down division, releases the captive, lets the oppressed go free, proclaims God's restoration and hope, brings abundant life for ALL people, builds beloved community, establishes justice and peace in all the earth.

That is powerful love – we should remember that. We should be in awe of that love. We should be humbled by that love. We should be challenged by that love. We should be a little bit afraid of that love – because our lives, our communities, our families, our world will never ever be the same.

And still we are bold to say:

Thanks be to God for the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.