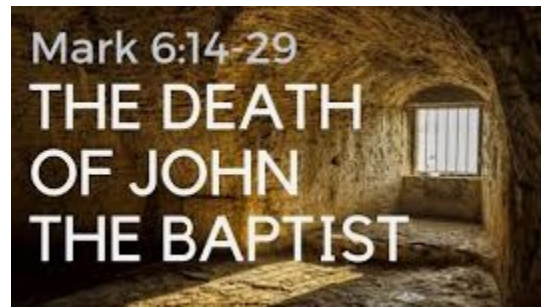


Reflection for Pentecost 8 Year B

Sunday, July 14th, 2024

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French poet, Victor Hugo, said “Conscience is God present in Man.”

Every one of us wants to make right choices, we want to do the right things, and we hope for positive outcomes in the decisions that we make, and, as believers, we ultimately want to please God.

How exactly, do we go about achieving that goal? A common answer given, both by both Christians and non-Christians alike, is “Let your conscience be your guide.”

For many of us, our first encounter with “conscience” may have been the classic 1940 Disney movie "Pinocchio." The Blue Fairy appoints Jiminy Cricket to be Pinocchio's conscience which he calls “that still, small voice that people won't listen to.” He advises the boy puppet to "take the straight and narrow path and if you start to slide - give a little whistle, give a little whistle and always let your conscience be your guide."

Actually, this adage is much older than 1940; it can be traced back nearly 1300 years, and its origin isn't Christian, it's Islamic. The father of one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives was returning to Medina after helping capture Jerusalem, where he prayed and gave a message at Jabiah. One of the things Al-Khattab said was: “And speak the truth. Do not hesitate to say what you consider to be the truth. Say what you feel. Let your conscience be your guide.”

(J. Kilson, April 23, 2014, sermoncentral.com)

So whatever the source may be ~ a Disney story, a sermon from Islamic history, or some place in between ~ we are taught that following our conscience is not only a very good thing, but also a very necessary thing. (Ibid)

BUT

Your conscience can be your guide only if it is guided by God's law which has been ingrained in your Christian self. If you have actively ignored this internal law for some time, your unguided conscience can quickly lead you astray.

Unfortunately for Herod Antipas, he didn't listen to his conscience and allowed a drunken promise to be granted. It cost John the Baptist his life. Our Gospel story is a story of a Crisis of Conscience ~ a story that is played out over and over again in history and in our lives and we can learn much from it.

In Mark's Gospel John is seen as a fulfillment of a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah about a messenger being sent ahead and a voice crying out in the wilderness. He was a fearless prophet, boldly calling attention to injustice and corruption, urging people to repent of their sins and return to God. It took a great deal of courage and conviction to be a man like that, especially to point out the sins of the ruler of Galilee. ("The Cost of Telling the Truth" by Br. David Vryhof, 2018, ssje.org)

Today's Gospel reading is one of the saddest in the bible; it is horrific in its violence, so senseless, with an awful resolution in the death of a devoted servant of God.

There isn't a single note of joy or hope anywhere in this text. It is a distressing tale of anger, resentment, and revenge, and the death of a conscience.

But first, some background:

In last week's Gospel reading we learned of Jesus' hometown rejection and the sending out of the twelve disciples to continue his ministry. Then Jesus learns of his cousin John the Baptist's execution at the hands of Herod Antipas. Jesus only began his ministry after John's arrest in Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel (v 14); at some point after that, John is executed. No more is mentioned of John until now. Herod hears of Jesus' ministry and thinks back to John's death, believing that John the Baptist has come back to life as Jesus. Today's story is a flashback to the circumstances of John's death.

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great and tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. He had married an Arabian princess but then discarded her in order to marry his half-brother's wife, Herodias. This was a scandalous violation of Mosaic Law, and only John the Baptist had the courage and moral fortitude to point out how wrong it was. Only John made any attempt to hold this ruler accountable for his lies and deceptions, and for his evil actions. No one else had the courage to speak the truth to him. (Ibid)

Herod's wife, Herodias, was angered by John's severe disapproval of her morals (or lack thereof). John's message was uncompromising, and he refused to kowtow to political correctness, to the "brood of vipers." (Luke 3:7) After John confronted Herod over his adulterous marriage, he was arrested and imprisoned, mostly due to his wife's pressure.

Herod was afraid to have the popular prophet killed, and even though Herod respected John as a righteous and holy man, he saw John as a growing threat to his rule.

It sounds as if there was an internal struggle going on in Herod; he was angry at what John was saying. Did he recognize the immorality of his life, that John was right? Did he know deep down there was truth in John's words? This man would speak to Herod's conscience.

But circumstances drastically changed when Herod Antipas threw himself a birthday party. During the drunken festivities, he allowed himself to be seduced by the sensuous dancing of his teenage daughter and tricked by his cunning wife into making a foolish promise that he had to carry out just to save face in the company of his equally inebriated guests. So he gave the order: John the Baptist was executed, and his severed head was brought to the girl, who then gave it to her mother, Herodias. (Ibid)

What can we learn from this story?

Is it a matter of sticking to your promises, regardless of the cost? Is it an admirable trait or a spineless move? Does the wrath of a person, or someone holding a grudge, justify vengeance, exploitation, and manipulation of others?

Herod could have made a different choice, but power, prestige, and self-importance had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he would not risk his reputation and the respect of the people in order to spare the prophet's life.

Conscience doesn't tell us we're violating God's standards; it tells us we're violating our own. Our lives are filled with choices. All of us have had those moments in our lives where we face a crossroad of conscience – we know what to do, we know what direction we are supposed to go.

Ben Hogan knew in what direction to go. There's a story about the professional golfer that he once accidentally tapped his ball and it moved ever so slightly. Hogan remarked to his caddie, "That will cost us a stroke." "I didn't see it, Mr. Hogan," the caddie replied, "and I'm sure no one else did." "I saw it," said Hogan, "and that's enough. I have to live with me." (Davon Huss, sermoncentral-sermonillustrations, 2010)

C.S. Lewis said that conscience is nothing more than the voice of God within our souls. That voice instinctively recognizes good and evil and tells right from wrong.

It's an important tool that God has given to us.

Let our conscience be our guide.

Amen

ADDENDUM

The Four Gospels in Parallel

The following link may be of interest for comparative readings of the Gospel text for each Sunday.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59a48b7e8fd4d29308a31745/t/60a544e725c8aa6d5b4c1d33/1621443816201/ABOV+Handout+-+The+Four+Gospels+in+Parallel-colorcoded.pdf>

Re: Mark 6:14-29

There has been extensive research into the parentage of the girl in verse 22:

22When his daughter Herodias 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."

According to the historian, Josephus, she was the daughter of Herodias and her first husband, Phillip, and named Salome.

In the NRSV of our gospel reading she is referred by name, giving the impression that she and her mother, Herodias, share the same given name and that she is also Herod's daughter.

The following links may be of interest to those who wish to explore the familial relationship of Herod, Herodias and the daughter.

1) Encyclopaedia Britannica:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Salome-stepdaughter-of-Herod-Antipas>

2) HTS Theological Studies:

https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222019000400057

Matthew (14:1-12) does state that the "girl" is the daughter of Herodias (therefore the stepdaughter of Herod Antipas):

6 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod 7 so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask.

In the **Gospel of Luke (9:7-9)** only the death of John the Baptist is mentioned in passing as Luke focusses on Herod Antipas' interest in Jesus and does not detail the circumstances of John's beheading.

7 Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen. 9 Herod said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he tried to see him.

However, **Luke Chapter 3** devotes the first eighteen verses to John the Baptist's proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Then, in verses 19 and 20 Luke writes of John's imprisonment by Herod for rebuking his marriage to Herodias:

19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Below is a concise reading, providing context, backstory, plot summary, and interpretation of Mark 6:14-29 ~ **"A Message the World Hates (The Cost of Discipleship)"** by Matthew Breeden, Southern Hills Baptist Church, Sunday, September 6, 2020

Link: <https://www.southernhillslife.org/get-connected/resources/sermons-and-podcasts/sermon/2020-09-06/a-message-the-world-hates-the-cost-of-discipleship-mark-6:14-29>