

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 10 (B)

July 15, 2018

DRAFT

“Birthday wish”

8 AM and 10 AM Sermons

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling

Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When 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.”

And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of

my kingdom.” She went out and said to

her mother, “What should I ask for?” She

replied, “The head of John the baptizer.”

Immediately she rushed back to the king

and requested, “I want you to give me at

once the head of John the Baptist on a

platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet

out of regard for his oaths and for the

guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Immediately the king sent a soldier of the

guard with orders to bring John’s head.

He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

O God, test our hearts and make us always true for you. Amen.

‘Make a wish and blow out the candles,’ we all chime in when a smiling friend faces their birthday cake. Rarely has any one said, ‘let my spouse give me a wish’ before we blow out the candles, and

today's gospel seems to affirm that wisdom. Really, when one has a chocolate icing topped raspberry and lemon cream birthday cake, why on earth would anyone want to see a severed head on a platter? Ugh. But such a sad and perplexing story is our gospel for today.

John the Baptist was an evangelist before there were gospels. But Jesus said one did not need to see or hear of someone rising from the dead to obtain forgiveness and eternal life; Jesus said the Old Testament was sufficient to teach people to turn away from sin and

towards eternal life, and that is exactly what John the Baptist proclaimed. The Gospels are a nice ‘add on’ for us ‘modern believers of the last two millennia, but they are not necessary for one to find eternal life in God. The Holy Spirit reminds us of what Jesus said, but Jesus himself said pretty much what was exactly in line with the Old Testament scriptures, sometimes clarifying them a bit, but never countering their true intent. Love your enemy as you love yourself. Love your neighbor. Do good even to those who loathe you and despise you.

These are not new commandments, but Old Testament commandments of which Jesus reminds us.

A few years ago I was asked by a parish in Westchester County to do a funeral for one of their parishioners. As I spoke to the family who were churchgoers there, it was clear that they wanted to have a Eucharist as part of the burial service. I agreed. The person who had passed had been a secretary to a well-known public figure in that town.

Shortly after I arrived at this rather tiny church, it was packed to the gills and still

more were coming in. The parishioners even had to put most of the funeral flowers in another room to seat all the people. It was a much 'bigger deal' that I had expected or that the church had expected.

I had asked the family to assign friends or relatives as readers of the lessons; when time came for the reading of the Psalm, the woman who came to the microphone began to intone the stanzas, and I thought, how nice and high church. But as she continued, the minor key she had chosen for her singing

quickly let me know that she was a Jewish cantor. And as I looked around at the congregation, I could see heads nodding as the Psalm was being intoned, and I suddenly realized that about half of the congregation were likely Jewish.

And here I was about to celebrate the Holy Feast of Christ in the Eucharist.

So, I collected myself after the sermon and had the inspiration that ‘let’s do an instructed Eucharist’ in which each part of what I was doing at the altar was explained much like we perhaps occasionally explain the worship service

to our children preparing for First Communion or Confirmation. And things went smoothly. It was not just mumbo-jumbo as some possibly expected, but it was connected even to what an Old Testament priest might have been doing at the Jerusalem Temple during Jesus' time on earth, when actual animals were sacrificed on the great Jerusalem altar. I consoled the congregation that we would not have to look on a bleeding slain animal (or on John the Baptist's head as in today's gospel), but that we Christians had a

more ‘sanitary’ offering of bread instead of actual animal flesh and wine instead of actual animal blood. And I even offered to spare the congregation the sprinkling of wine everywhere like the Old Testament priests would do with the blood of the sacrificed animal. We have so ‘tamed’ the Eucharist that it is not easy to see that what we are doing is exactly what was done in Jesus’ day, but without the necessary knife for a blood sacrifice. The problem we have created is that generally folks do not realize we are reenacting at the Eucharist the

sacrifice of Jesus bleeding on the cross to take away our sins. The painful nature of what Jesus had to withstand during crucifixion is very sanitized and proper so we often can hardly remember what gruesome spiritual history we generally have been spared from unless we are modern-day persecuted saints in some countries throughout the world.

Occasionally I hear these horror stories from refugees in the federal detention center where I volunteer each week—some have parents and other family members who because of their faith were

injured or murdered or threatened with death, and some have even brought in films of their places of business after they were destroyed by a non-Christians majority in their home country—the immigration judges have to scrutinize the films and stories to determine when people have legitimate claims of ‘life threatening consequences should they be returned to their home country’.

Orthodox Egyptian deacons, for example, are always at risk when there are upsets there—they do not wear clergy collars and do not receive the

generally more protective treatment that the Orthodox Christian priests and bishops receive. Their automobiles are frequently one of the initial points of attack.

So, John's plight is actually what some others today as Christians experience throughout the world. And I surmise that perhaps many of them do not make it onto a jet plane to escape; but a few do.

Our world is not a world at peace in many local communities. There is indeed persecution throughout the world,

and at times we find people even in this country are horribly abused and even killed. Homicide is not unknown; as a disaster chaplain in New York City, I have been in the Office of the Medical Examiner where there is a display of reconstructed busts of the heads of people still unidentified who have been found slain and sometimes put into the concrete underpinnings of various buildings.

Today's Gospel is a bit much, wouldn't you say? We rarely feature such gory details, but it does serve to

bring us back to the reality of what Our Lord and Savior did experience in order to bring us life eternal. Perhaps we do not value enough what he did, what he really did, for us.

Our Episcopal Church has this week reaffirmed that we indeed in a new ‘season’ of evangelism; our three-year budget has been carved out to support this particular effort. And as an expression of what evangelism might even foretell, at the recently ended General Convention in Austin some Bishops and deputies took to the street

beside the J.W. Marriot Hotel to evangelize in the streets. Wow.

Many years ago I and a friend of mine and several others were challenged to begin center city evangelism right in Grand Central Station. Yes, wow, again. And when a person seemed to be interested in putting Christ on the pedestal of their life instead of putting themselves there, we invited them to explore the possibility further by coming to a church Bible study. Before that Bible study began I was recruited to help teach it, and the lives of many in that

Bible study and my life as well changed dramatically. Five of us became Episcopal priests, many became members of the church vestry and other church committees and activities. And the church began to grow like it never had grown in thirty years. But it all started with two of us willing to ‘witness’ in the ‘public arena’.

I doubt many of us here will be willing to go out and witness their faith somewhere publicly in this community. Yet some will in various and sundry ways, and a tremendous difference will

be made here and in our community.

But we need the boldness of St. John the Baptist to urge us onward and upward.

The wonder-filled Kingdom of God is at hand, right here, right now. May we invite others to partake of it.

Amen.

Description:

As a church we are being challenged to speak to others about our faith, to be bold, to be evangelists for Jesus.

Tags:

John, Baptist, God, Jesus, Christ, Spirit, Bible, Old, Testament, Kingdom, invite, Jewish, Eucharist, sacrifice, animal, blood, wine, body, bread, baptize, instructed, study, evangelize

St. Stephen's Episcopal ProCathedral

35 S. Franklin Street

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 18701

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 10 (B)

July 12, 2015

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Martyrs”

The Holy Gospel: Mark 6:14-29

Test our hearts, Dear Lord, and bring us closer to your will and your ways.

Amen.

On humility: an admirer once asked Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, what was the hardest instrument to play? He replied without hesitation: “Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm or second French horn or second flute, now that’s a

problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”

John the Baptist played second fiddle to Jesus throughout his life, and John did it with great enthusiasm, initiating the very rite we perform today, baptism, for these two babies born nine days apart in the same hospital. By their baptisms we mark their entry into the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom whose underpinnings John died for, and whose security Jesus sacrificed himself for.

Bishop John Chrysostom was a great preacher of the fifth century. He said of

the beheading of John, "Herod cut off his head, but he did not cut off his voice."

No matter what evil people may do, the voice of the gospel will not be silenced.

I thank God for those who risk everything to make certain it is heard.

The question is: are we among the truth-tellers?

Jan and I for several years have been big fans of a television program called, "America's Got Talent," that airs on NBC Television in the coming weeks on Monday nights. It is one of the more wholesome programs on television,

always entertaining; it is a sort of a modernization of the talent shows of earlier television days. It has actually produced some amazing success stories for its top performers over its eight year run—one has a multimillion dollar headline act in Las Vegas, another is a double platinum album singer, and a former car wash worker is now singing to sellout audiences all over the country. Last year we were invited to be present at Madison Square Garden in the film studio and to be in conversation with some of the contestants during their

preparation just prior to their auditions for “America’s Got Talent”. One performer told me he had ten years earlier been the stage act right before a comedian ventriloquist who is now internationally renowned with his many faced and many voiced puppets. That comedian had been the ‘warm up’ talent for someone who now is a world class entertainer. This artist I spoke to made it through his first tryout on America’s Got Talent as an artist who performs amazing feats of painting live while he is on stage. But even this new beginning was

to become a warm up act for someone else who would become a big headliner performer. That was in a way similar to what John the Baptist was called to be, the warm up act to Jesus Christ. Can you imagine that?! And John did his job very well, so well that John was even chosen to baptize Jesus in the Jordan River.

What a warm up act that was! However, one New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, has noted that the difference between John and Jesus was that John the Baptist ‘had a monopoly, but Jesus had a franchise.’

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist

Professor Crossan's comment refers to the fact that eventually Jesus' disciples would be baptizing far more than John himself, even though John began the practice of baptism as a sign of repentance. John's own disciples were not baptizing; only John himself did that; but, after Jesus' death, all of Jesus' disciples apparently were doing baptisms. And in fact, all Christians everywhere are authorized to baptize someone in the cases of urgent need,

regardless of whether the baptizer is ordained or not. John was ‘over the counter,’ but Jesus was ‘The Prescription.’ John had a process, but Jesus was ‘The Product.’ John was bronze, but Jesus was far more than silver, gold, and diamonds.

The Herod family connections that John the Baptist complained about were very complex and convoluted. Herod Antipas, who married Herodias, was half-brother to both Herod Philip and Aristobolus, other sons of Herod the Great. Herodias was the daughter of

Aristobolus. So Herod Antipas had actually married his uncle's daughter who would thus be Herod Antipas' niece; but she had also been the wife of Herod Antipas' brother Philip; and Herodias had a daughter by Philip, Salome, who would then have been the daughter of Herod Antipas' niece, making Herod Antipas Salome's great uncle; but Herod Antipas was also her uncle as well. And a great uncle of Salome would have been Salome's mother's uncle. So, Herod Antipas' is both his wife's uncle and his wife's

husband. And Salome, Herod Antipas' half daughter, is also Herod's great niece. But if Herod is Salome's great-uncle, then Herodias is his half-daughter's great aunt; so Herod is married to his niece who also is his great niece, who is the daughter of his uncle, and the wife of his brother. But if Herod Antipas is his half-daughter's uncle, then Herodias is his half-daughter's aunt, as well as her daughter Salome's mother. So, Salome's uncle Herod Antipas is also her great uncle as well as her father by marriage. Thus Salome surely had

Herod Antipas completely wrapped around her little finger, so any simple dance she did would have had Herod Antipas' blessing and encouragement. It is indeed a very twisted family, with very twisted results! Perhaps you have heard of the old song, "I am my own grand-pa" sung by Ray Stevens.

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=i%27m+my+own+grandpa+lyrics&FORM=VIRE1#view=detail&mid=A1D465FE16FFCBF4ED97A1D465FE16FFCBF4ED97>

The lyrics are at:

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/im-my-own-grandpa-lyrics-ray-stevens.html>

That country western song traces a very odd marriage that end up with the singer realizing that his wife is also his grandmother—so that he has become his own grandpa. The situation of the marriage of Herod Antipas and Herodias was just as confused and conflicted! And the brunt of all this inter-family intrigue came down on John who became vulnerable to the woman Herodias whose current husband John had criticized, King Herod Antipas. And Herodias'

powerful husband wielded life and death over his subjects, especially over the life and death of one Herod Antipas had put into prison, John the Baptist, supposedly to protect John from Herodias. But the slender thread by which John's life was held was quickly dispatched by a drunken and misguided king Herod Antipas.

The distorted family system's perversity would also to be directed eventually against Jesus from Nazareth, Jesus the Messiah. Herod Antipas would later question the captive Jesus and send

him back to Pontius Pilot for execution. Herod's hands dripped with innocent blood, much as had his father Herod the Great's hands been fouled before him. It was said that a common saying at that time was that it was safer to be Herod the Great's pig than his son or wife—Herod had already murdered both one son and one wife.

Once John crossed Herod Antipas, the wheel of history had been set in motion, the wheel which would end the life of the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, John the Baptist, as well as eventually

end the life of the One, Jesus, who would herald the inbreaking of God into God's creation through God's only Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. The first death would be avenged by the second death; however, as the Lord in the tomb did not die forever, but he descended to the dead to bring up to the heavenly realms those who heard Christ preach and accepted him as their Savior; surely John the Baptist was one of those 'harrowed' up from hell, as the Orthodox Christians describe this miracle of Good Saturday before Easter Day.

But the bloodshed of course did not stop with Jesus, the bloodshed continued through the deaths of Peter and Paul and all the other apostles and many after them. The end of the Old Testament Age was marked by a great blood-letting through the end of the New Testament. No wonder the Bible ends with the visions of the end of the world as that surely was on the minds of most Christians by the end of the first century AD. By then the persecutions of the Roman emperors had slaughtered thousands of Christ followers.

Lutheran Pastor Edward Markquart
wrote the following:

http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_beheading_of_john_the_baptist.htm

“One of the early church fathers said that the ‘blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.’ Throughout the centuries, the martyrs have inspired us Christians with their commitment unto death.

“This story of John the Baptist invites us to have the courage to be truth-tellers, to tell the truth of both God’s morality and God’s way of salvation to people

around us. When we do, we are often ridiculed, rejected and occasionally even killed for doing so.

“A tendency among all Christians is to ‘play it safe,’ ‘keep one’s mouth shut,’ ‘don’t offend folks around us,’ ‘keep peace in the family,’ ‘keep peace in the nation.’ Yes, there is a safety in being silent before the evil around us.

Pastor Markquart continues, “There are at least four characteristics of martyrs like John the Baptist:

“First, martyrs get killed, not for their convictions, but for expressing their

convictions. Martyrs don't keep their faith private. Martyrs are people who 'don't know better' but they open their mouths and often at the wrong times.

They refuse to keep their mouths shut, and therefore they get into trouble.

There are all kinds of people who have beliefs in Christ and beliefs in Christian values and they never get hurt at all. The key is to keep your mouth shut and you won't get hurt. Keep your mouth shut, and nobody will bother you. But as soon as you open your mouth about Christ and the Christian faith, that is when you will

start becoming a martyr. The same Greek word is used for both ‘witnesses’ and ‘martyrs’, *marterion*, and both have a lot in common: both witnesses and martyrs open their mouths for Jesus Christ.

<https://emailmeditations.wordpress.com/2017/12/16/1710-called-to-witness/>

So. Stephen [our church’s patron saint] had this problem, as did all martyrs, the problem of not keeping their mouths shut and keeping silent about their Christian convictions.

“A second characteristic of a martyr is not only what they say but when and where they say it. For example, back in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era, if you declared that you were a Christian, you could be killed for it. If you said the same thing in the United States, nobody would be bothered at all. It is not just what you say but when and where you say it that makes for martyrdom. If you talk about Christ and social justice in church among believing friends, nobody gets too upset about it. But in certain situations and certain epochs of history,

you can get killed for saying the same words.

“A martyr is not a person who checks [the flow of common thinking]. They don’t say to themselves, ‘I will check the wind of public opinion, and then I will make my pronouncement.’ That person [a witness, a martyr] has the guts to go against culture. That person has the guts to go against public opinion. They have the guts to go against the king or governing authority.

“John the Baptist expressed his convictions to both Herod and Herodias

and got killed for it. It would have been safe for the Baptist to express his convictions [only] privately to his disciples and friends.

“A third characteristic of a martyr is that they are willing to die. They don’t want to die, but they are willing to die for Jesus Christ [so] that others might live in justice and freedom.

“Christian martyrs believe passionately in Jesus Christ. These martyrs believe so deeply that they are willing to die for their faith in Christ and their consequent moral values. These

martyrs don't hide behind the safety of silence; they speak God's Word when and where it is not safe to speak the truth; and they are willing to die for the truth of Christ.

“A fourth characteristic of martyrs: martyrs inspire us. Martyrs encourage us. Martyrs lift us up so that we are more committed to Jesus Christ in our day and age, in our world.”

Pastor Markquart concludes: “The beheading of John the Baptist invites us to be honest about immorality when we see it.

Amen.