

Thomas R. Cook  
Saint Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 12, 2015

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## “Even for Herod?”

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Scripture: Mark 6:14-29; 7 Pentecost B (Proper 10 - RCL)

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I know it's not necessarily my best theological critique, but...: “Yuck!” What a terrible story! Yucky people, yucky sleaze, yucky relationships, yucky motivations, yucky gore. I mean, come on! We bring children to church. What's this doing in the Bible? What kind of story is this for decent company? Just despicable behavior and horrid people: vindictive, murderous, cruel, adulterous, sleazy people.

Okay. I feel better. I got that off my chest. Yet it occurs to me... Jesus lived for the sake of such people. In this story of family Herod and John the Baptist, no doubt we are seeing the ugliness of life, but we are also seeing the shocking and generous intentions of the Gospel. I gather that Jesus couldn't abide Herod any more than the rest of us could, but I figure he didn't hate Herod. What I mean is... Isn't the point of Jesus' life to call such people to repentance? Did not he and John offer them a way to healing and reconciliation? Did not he and John call them to turn from their destructive ways? Did not he and John ask them to face the truth? Did they not desire that they be released from the burdens of greed and power and lust and malice?

Herod was onto it. We are told he was perplexed by John, and yet he liked to listen to him. Might it be that John told Herod the truth, made him look in the mirror, reminded him that, with God's help, Herod could become something better? I bet John understood Herod's dilemma. He knows Herod is greatly flawed and distressed. And in addition to his own foibles, Herod is also bound to a clever, spiteful, and malevolent spouse. His desirable step-daughter is on display for all his cronies to ogle. He must constantly watch his back or he'll get a knife in it. The Roman overlords tolerate him, but can destroy him at will. He's apparently terrified of ghosts and fears that John the Baptist has returned from the dead to haunt him in the guise of Jesus of Nazareth. This doesn't sound like a great life to me. Might John and Jesus have pitied such a person? I think so. But pity doesn't mean they are unaccountable for their sins.

Look, this really is a difficult story. It reminds us that sometimes life is not beautiful, and I regret this entire circumstance. I regret the lust for power and riches that makes people so ambitious and immoral and inhumane. I regret the sadness that must have swallowed the friends and followers of John after he was so coldly and uselessly killed. I regret that the guards were capable of so callously carrying out a death sentence. I regret that a girl was so used by her mother for her own base desires and ambitions. Yet my regret eventually gives way to something deeper. We

so need salvation; all of us. Not just later, not just in some world to come. But here. Now. Because in some hall of power today, in some business, in some school or church, in some household, the daughter of Herodias still dances while people plot each other's ruin and destruction.

I want us to take care this morning that we not treat this story too tritely, as if it is only some soap opera about yucky people long ago and far away, and it has nothing to do with us. True, I gather none of us are so despicable as that Herod family, but my guess is we've all have our own moments of shortcoming, of anger, of a desire for vengeance, of foolishness, of envy, of lustfulness, of hurtful thoughts toward some other. And in those moments, we can't afford to miss the whole point of the life of Jesus? He didn't live and die for people because we are good, because sometimes we're really not. And I suppose he didn't live and die for people just because we are bad, because sometimes we're really not.

I think Jesus lived and died for us because he loves us and wants to free us from the tyranny of sin. He knows we can be so bound by our own desires, so prone to scratch the itch of selfishness, so beset by fears and self-doubt, so judgmental of the lives of others, so burdened by the needs of the day. His life says, "Look, God loves you... anyway." So there is another way: a way of love and faith and forgiveness and goodness towards one another.

The past Wednesday night I had my first experience of the gathering of the “Martyrs”, a men’s discussion group of St. Stephen’s Church, and we were talking a bit about the nature of drug addiction and how we as a society perceive and govern it. And our leader challenged us to consider how we treat addicts and those who break drug laws in light of Jesus’ call to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” Now that can seem a stretch. What’s love got to do with it anyway? Yet without love, addicts are only a burden upon society, and criminals a scar. Without love all the atrocities that we witness over time and in our times seem utterly unredeemable. Without love how can we expect to be forgiven when we hurt someone, or when we overlook the plight of our neighbor in need? Without love why commission our youth to serve the people of the White Earth reservation like they will this week? They are undertaking a serious labor of love in the complicated lives of others, sharing hope and life, and stories. What’s love got to do with it? Well, for us Christian, hopefully everything.

And that is why I think this terrible story of Herod and John the Baptist is in the Bible. Because it’s real. I’m sorry to say it, but sometimes that ugliness is a part of life. It’s certainly a part of Jesus’ life. And now it’s a part of our own. And underneath all the ugliness is the need for love. This is not some gratuitous R-rated interlude in an otherwise glorious and beautiful “rose-colored-glasses” story of the Christ. This *is* the story of the Christ, all the ugliness, all the repugnant people, and all

the possibilities for redemption and for beauty. This is a time when reconciliation and forgiveness are sorely needed, though not always heeded. And as I said in the beginning of this sermon, though this story is despicable, it is into broken lives that Jesus comes and brings healing when we need it.

I don't know that Herod ever took him up on the offer. But when we need healing, I hope we will. And when others need healing, I hope we will help.