



God's Love Bears Fruit

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given July 15, 2018

Mark 6:7-29

I have an Uncle from Knoxville, Tennessee who for years has been very fond of saying, "It's all good," after nearly anything that happens. I picked that saying up from him a long ago, which used to drive a boyfriend I had at the time crazy. He would hear me say "It's all good," and say, "What are you talking about? It's so obviously NOT all good. Quit saying that." To which I would respond, "Would you relax??" But of course, the boyfriend wasn't wrong. We all know there are plenty of things in life that have no apparent redeeming value, or nothing obviously good in them, and I hate to say it, but today's gospel story about the beheading of John the Baptist is one of them. My brother Steve is also a preacher and we were talking about preaching today on this strangest of stories, and he said to me that as long as we all understand the Bible as just the ancient equivalent of Game of Thrones, we'll be fine.

Well the Game of Thrones is meant to be entertainment, but I think we can imagine that the writer of Mark's gospel didn't pen the story about beheading John the Baptist for entertainment purposes. So let's pretend for a minute that the Bible is in part meant to be a mirror to us of our own lives. If that's true, I hope you can forgive me if I ask you a question. When was the last time there was a true injustice in your life--one that was done to you, or one in which you somehow despite all your best intentions became implicated? When was the last time you were really disappointed or felt hopeless? I know it's not fun to think about those things, let alone talk about them at church, but as a priest once said to me, if we can't talk about that stuff at church, what good are we? Those situations do damage, and it's really hard to know how to deal with them.

The story about John the Baptist is, among other things, a situation of injustice and violence, and there are lots of ways it's a mirror of the baser side of the human condition. We see Herod, who did in a particularly disgusting way what we can all be tempted to do – which is to sacrifice other people to retain our own power, or reputation, or safety. We can see something else we all know to be true, that when sex and power get too close to each other, justice is always the victim. The #metoo movement is full of stories about this. We see how things play out when people feel hostage to the system and not responsible for unjust outcomes. Whose is responsible for John being beheaded? Was it the soldier who did the deed, or reckless Herod who didn't intend this particular outcome but didn't shy away from it either, or his daughter who was asked to dance before his guests, or his mother who wanted to remove any question about the legitimacy of her marriage, or even the guests who didn't step in to say we don't need this? Whose responsibility is it when our system produces violent or unjust outcomes, like the children under five years old who now cannot be restored to their parents because they've already been deported without sending their children with them? Is it the border guard, or the administration enforcing previous laws, or the Congress who passed previous laws, or the nation with its priorities and fears? Is the point about blame and finding who is responsible?

So this story is not all good, and we all have situations in our lives that are not good. But we know that already, and we need way more than just being reminded of it. We need the meaning and reality of the word “gospel,” which is good news. So where is it?

This is where as our former Deacon Diane would say, context matters. It helps to know what's happening right around the story of John the Baptizer. Just before this story, Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two, with no bag, no money, no change of clothes, no extra shoes, to all the surrounding villages to do three things: to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to the people, and to liberate them from evil spirits, and to heal them. And even though the disciples were totally vulnerable, they had no backup safety plan

and no provisions, they were making such an impact that Herod heard about them.

Back when Jesus first went into public ministry, John the Baptist had just been arrested. And the way this is written, it seems to me that Jesus sent his disciples out just after John had been killed. So you have this simultaneous move going on: on the one hand, Herod kills the one who spoke truth to him about what he had done wrong—power kills the prophet; and on the other hand, Jesus sends out small ambassadors with no resources all over the place to preach repentance and to liberate people from evil and to heal them from sickness. And the people are responding.

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the four different kinds of soil? How Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a farmer who throws seed out on the ground? The disciples are out there planting seeds of good news. They are doing this because they themselves had seen Jesus' good news. They had observed him healing people who were very sick and they had seen the way he invited even tax collectors and hookers to be his companions and the way he touched and got closed to and loved lepers and others who society treated with disgust. They had observed these things, and it gave them hope, and they took that hope into themselves. They let themselves be transformed by what they saw. They were like the good soil that allowed good news to sink into who they were, so that new life could spring up out of them, new life that would bear fruit. So they went about the towns and villages proclaiming repentance and liberation from evil and healing of sickness to everyday people, and instead of people putting up with them politely like you might put up with someone going door to door selling a good deal on roof repair or tree trimming or even Jehovah's witnesses, the disciples were making a difference so much so that even Herod heard of them.

But why is preaching repentance to everyday villagers good news, honestly? Isn't it Herod who really needs to repent? John the Baptist already did point out Herod's wrongs, and he lost his life for it. But Jesus and his disciples know that even the everyday people have to repent. Repentance means to

turn, to change your mind about something. The people need to turn from seeing the world only in terms of Herod and Rome, a world where might makes right, and instead begin to see a world where the kingdom of God truly exists. They need to become good soil, where new, fragile, yet powerful life can sprout in them.

Their repentance is basically what our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has been inviting people to do at the Episcopal Church National Convention that just wrapped up this past week in Austin Texas, where Dave Holmberg was. Bishop Curry said that Jesus calls us, not just to speak truth to power, but to speak love to power. He said that the opposite love isn't hate, and it's not even fear: it's selfishness. The old theologian of the Reformation, Martin Luther, said that sin is basically being curved in on ourselves. We get curved in on ourselves as a defense mechanism for lots of things: suffering or being neglected by those who were supposed to nurture us or just a habit that gets entrenched. Repentance is receiving the love of God into our most guilty or numb or sick or hurt places, so much so that it liberates us to flip outward.

Remember that question I asked you at the beginning, where I asked when was the last time a wrong was done – either to you, or one in which you despite your best intentions became implicated? A time when you felt really disappointed, or hopeless? Repentance doesn't mean taking responsibility for someone else's violence toward you. It does mean turning from seeing violence, or hopelessness, as the last word. It means opening ourselves to the love of God, which heals us enough, and forgives us enough, that we can care not just for ourselves but for God and our neighbors. Repentance frees us to risk going out two by two to proclaim forgiveness and liberation and healing to everyday people. It frees us to take risks to bring about the kingdom of God, to move away from blaming others to taking responsibility to see that love and justice are done, in our personal lives, and in the life of our country and our world.

So the soap operas of the Bible and the world continue on, ferociously. The prophets of this world do get beheaded, in biblical times and now. But John

the Baptizer can't be silenced. We're telling his story even today. The same situation still exists today as it did then: we have violence and corruption and selfishness everywhere, but we also have the love of Christ constantly working in us and creating more life and more healing and forgiveness.

So back to that time you were really disappointed? Or hurt? Or felt hopeless? When the soap operas of the world felt like the most reliable truth? When the Herods of the world win? What is our responsibility in such a moment?

We go back to the beginning. We remember that the difference between good soil and soil that produces nothing is the simple willingness to take in what we have been given. To make the love of God in Christ your own today, and to do the same thing again tomorrow and the next day, because tomorrow you'll need the love of God again for a different reason. That love is the seed of the Kingdom of God, the root of all life in the Realm of God. We trust that even though beheadings happen all the time, in God's Realm they never have the last word. We ourselves are called here to this assembly, week after week, to be broken open, forgiven, healed, nourished, blessed, and then sent out again, with nothing but God's love to defend us, nothing but God's love to offer. Because that love bears fruit. And that is good news.