

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – 2021

Amos 7:7-15

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

Is there evil in the world? Is there evil in high places? Are there men of standing who are weak and vulgar and insipid? Are there women, caught in sin, who are eager to extinguish those who catch them? Is cancel culture a real thing, born of rage, born of a desire to silence those voices who don't heel to totalitarian boots?

After listening to the Gospel lesson, one wants to do two things simultaneously – weep and wash. John the Baptist's death is tragic. John the Baptist's death is heartachingly sad. It is as though the boundary between earth and hell was removed when "King" Herod celebrated his birthday by throwing a banquet for his bootlickers. That John the Baptist should have his life snuffed out in a ghoulish and perverted drama – hearing of it stuns one into silence. Herod and Herodias and Salome (Herodias's daughter), that is *my* human race. The film of their sin is so close to my own skin, I have the urge to immerse myself in sanitizer. What befell the Baptizer is a dance that hell could not have choreographed with more spite. You should have no doubt that evil is among us and that it wants to run the boardroom, evil wants to run the schoolroom, and evil wants to run the courtroom.

The particulars are as easy to assemble as Lincoln Logs. Herodias married Herod Philip, her uncle. Herod Antipas, Philip's brother, seduced Herodias and they both divorced their spouses and married each other. Levitical Law speaks very clearly against such things and John the Baptist was the law's mouthpiece. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). The remark was directed at Herod, but Herodias was publicly humiliated. Guilt; guilt is a terrible taskmaster, a terrible motivator. A conscience stricken by guilt sees darkness to the left, darkness to the right and longs for an avenue that is soaked by light and freedom and self-respect. Herodias forged her own path – murderous, hellish, and unrepentant. Her guilt was real and serious, a cresting wave. Herodias was in a bad place. By avoiding a proper response to her sin, Herodias turned her guilt into a tsunami that would bury her beneath an ocean of evil.

Herodias' sin wasn't going away and she held a grudge (Mark 6:19). She had no intention of rectifying the situation by aligning her behavior with God's law. She saw only one option, only one way to make the pain stop. John had to be silenced. Herod, an agent of the civil realm, arrested John and slapped him in prison. Decide for yourself how much Herodias had to do with that. Scripture tells us clearly – Herodias wanted John dead (Mark 6:19). Remember this: the unbelieving world is not going to stop being the unbelieving world. Unbelief is not neutral when it comes to God's Word, the Lordship of Christ, the life of faith that is lived out in Christ's church. Unbelief holds a very active grudge against those born of water and the Spirit. The church raises her voice against abortion, against assaulting children with gender confusion, against pornography, against the madness of critical race theory – not because we are defending our own ideas but because God's Word compels us – and the world holds a grudge.

Herod was a weasel. Double-minded, Herod could not be relied upon to save John. Herodias laid her trap and Herod walked into it. Salome, Herodias' seductive daughter, gyrate

satisfactorily. Herod the degenerate gushed that he would give her anything. Salome dashed off to Herodias who tells her to ask for John's head. Salome ramps up the macabre request: "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (Mark 6:25). Herod caves. Herod is yellow. The most horrific request is made and the supposed "king" sent an executioner to make it so.

Who is your King? Whose reign defends the weak, defends the vulnerable, defends the forgotten? Who is your King? Who upholds life? Who stands between you and the sword of the law, who stands between you and divine judgment, who stands between you and death? King Herod and all who follow him or Christ the King – who commands your allegiance? Are you more interested in a political kingdom or a divine one?

John is martyred by an earthly ruler. Was John defeated? Not a single one of us believes that John is defeated. John is a victor. Jesus saved John. Jesus' blood, Jesus' resurrection were there when John was beheaded. Jesus and His resurrection saved John. But the circumstances of John's death must not be forgotten. We are in a broken world. This world is not our home. This tragic, broken creation is not where we will end our days. To be here is to be away from our home. Victory; victory comes into this world. Are you dismayed by what you see around you? The time for being dismayed is over. Our eyes are to be on what Christ is doing. The time is come for us to defend what is good with a full-throated eagerness. Jesus' victory extends to all the corners of this earth – it cannot be taken away. We bear His name, His light, His purpose.

The Pharisees and the religious rulers thought that they held all the cards. They played their hand, plying Pilate with their veiled political threats. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposed Caesar" (John 19:12). The Pharisees got what they wanted. Do any of you believe that the Pharisees were in charge on Good Friday, in charge of Christ's death? Pilate, the governor, was he in charge? No one took Jesus' life from Him. He laid it down of His own accord. Jesus had the authority to lay down His life and He had the authority to take it up again (John 10:18). Jesus used His authority for you. No force can outflank Christ and His Word. We cannot be defeated. Resurrection defined John, defined the church that was persecuted in the first centuries, resurrection defines us.

John was in prison, but he was free. Herod was in palaces but he was a prisoner – to fear, to his sin, a prisoner to Satan's losing game. Sometimes we are prisoner; to guilt. Sometimes we are prisoner; holding a grudge. Being prisoner... who, precisely, does that hurt? Sometimes we want to silence the law because we have no intention of changing our sinful ways. Is that you? Is that me? *That* is a dangerous game. None of us can serve two masters. Either God alone is your Master and you regularly examine yourself and repent of the evil that you find or you are playing a dangerous game. "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). That's what John said to the crowds. Project these words on Herodias and imagine the heroine she could have been: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Thank-you for sending John to me to point out my transgressions. Take my sin from me and restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

Guilt; while in this body you will always contend with it. Some days you may look to the left and see only darkness, look to the right and see the same thing. King David had guilt; gobs of it. I can't imagine what he saw, after what he did. The Prophet Nathan exposed David's guilt

(adultery, murder) and repentance was awakened. Here is the truth: Christ set David free. David saw God's grace (an avenue soaked with light and freedom and sacrificial blood) and by that grace alone David was set free. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1). God became man to set sinners free. The Lord Christ and He alone became prisoner to sin. He bore your sin on the holy cross and the guilt that goes with it. You are free. Jesus was swallowed up by the tsunami of crucifixion, giving His life as a sacrifice for the whole world. You are free. He was laid in the tomb and you were set free.

No one can put us back into that prison from which Christ has set us free. Look at this altar and you will see your freedom. Look at the crucifix, hear the absolution, gaze into the Scripture, taste the Eucharistic feast – "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7). You *will* bear fruit in keeping with our freedom for God is at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). Loving God above all things and loving our neighbor as ourselves, the fruit of Christ will be in rich supply in this holy house, in our lives, and wherever God's Word is proclaimed. Why is this? Because Christ has set us free.