

## Sermon 7 14 & 15 18

What an extraordinary gospel today! Does anybody here watch soap operas? They're almost all gone now, I think, but I remember when I was in college, loong before DVRs, loong before you could watch TV on your phone, students used to arrange their class schedules and rush back to their dorms to watch "All My Children." They called it "All My Kids"!

Soap operas! I wasn't big on soap operas because of my mother. She had a deep-seated prejudice against them ever since one she had listened to religiously on the radio was cancelled. It wasn't just because it was cancelled that she was outraged. No! It was because all the years of plot twists and turns in storyline were wrapped up in ONE episode! She was disgusted. Not exactly a work of art!

But our gospel for today is definitely soap opera material. The story of John and Baptist and Herod and Herodias his wife and her daughter, (who we call Salome, but the Bible calls Herodias as well), has been the source for many works of art: At least 2 plays, an opera, a ballet, at least 7 films, not to mention 3 books, 10 songs and any number of paintings. Most of these works of art have been named after "Salome." The Bible doesn't tell us what her name actually was.

Look at this picture on the front of our program. It's amazing! The lovely lady, so well dressed in her Renaissance finery, holding a platter with a man's head on it. She looks like the cat who swallowed the canary! There's an invitation to Coffee Hour for you! I guess the artist wasn't concerned with historical accuracy. But I think in terms of her attitude, the portrait may very well be accurate. So few moments of power were possible for a woman of her time.

I recall hearing a fellow priest say that this gospel reading is about a dysfunctional family. To say the least. The Herod referred to here was known as Herod Antipas. His father had been known as Herod the Great. Herod the Great was responsible for trying to trick the Magi into revealing the location of the baby Jesus. He was known for his terrible cruelty in a cruel age. He was paranoid and responsible for the deaths of at least two of his own sons. There's dysfunction for you!

A surviving son, Herod Antipas, married his brother's wife and he has this kind of "icky" scene with his niece, now step-daughter, and gets himself tricked into a situation where he has to order the beheading of a man he didn't want to harm, John the Baptist.

But this is when we find out something even more interesting about Herod Antipas. John the Baptist had insulted his wife. He accused Herod of violating Jewish law by marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. So Herodias hated John, but Herod doesn't. Mark tells us, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him." In the Bible, when someone fears, it doesn't just mean "to be afraid of" as we understand it. It also means "to be in awe of." Herod was in awe of John.

Later in Mark we are told that whenever Herod heard John speak, he was "greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him." Perplexed and yet liked to listen to him. Herod was drawn to John.

What was this fascination? Was it because John was wild and free of obligations and could say whatever he wanted to? And Herod had to be Rome's man? Rome kept him in power. He could never say what he really thought. And now he had drunkenly forced himself into killing one of the few truly free men he knew. But the Gospel doesn't say he was angry or enraged at that. No – he was "deeply grieved." Deeply grieved. Grieving as if he'd lost a friend.

Somehow, on some level, Herod and John connected. They understood each other. They could never truly be friends, but somehow Herod knew that John understood him as no one else did. This clearly frightened him, but yet he desired that John remain alive. And later, he deeply mourned John's death. He mourned the death of the outsider, the renegade, the rebel.

In our Thursday Bible study we talked in one class about the difference between the mission of John and the mission of Jesus. And our instructors on film, Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, put it this way: John had a monopoly: when John died, his movement died with him. Jesus had, Jesus *has* a franchise – his movement carried on, his movement carries on.

We don't hear much about John's disciples. In fact, two of them, Andrew and John, became disciples of Jesus. Jesus' disciples were instructed to pick up his cross and continue his mission – and they did! Jesus, the ultimate outsider, led others to be outsiders too!

Just like Paul. Sometimes I think Paul reveled in being an outsider. But in our reading from Ephesians he is so reassuring. He promises the followers of Jesus love and joy and peace. He tells them they will be adopted by God and receive a glorious inheritance, new life. It's all so reassuring, especially for people who live in fear of persecution. They have so much to look forward to! But it's all *sometime* in the future.

This has always been hard for the people of God. It's hard to believe in God's promises if you can't see them, if you have to have faith. And yet, that is precisely what God asks us to do – to have faith.

Consider the psalm we recited together today. Consider these words from it.

“Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.”

And that is the future we can look forward to if we embrace faith. Without faith, what we believe in becomes an intellectual exercise. With faith, we can move forward in the knowledge that God's grace is freely given. God's love is freely offered. And we are free to receive it. This is the gift of faith.

Underneath everything John said to Herod, that was the message. And on some level, Herod knew it and he couldn't accept it. He had to do what he said he would do in a moment of drunken brashness. He had to abide by a drunken oath. He couldn't step outside the box. God asks us to step outside the box with faith. All God asks of us is to accept the gift of grace and love and to live out our gratitude for it in faith.