

SEVEN AFTER PENTECOST – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. *Amen.*

This is an unusual gospel passage this morning, for Jesus is referred to but does not really appear in a particular event. Chronologically, the paragraphs are in reverse order, for the story of John the Baptist's imprisonment and death occur earlier, perhaps within the first months after John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan. They parted and John went back to his preaching, both about the Messiah who is to come and other matters. One of these was about the marriage of Herod and Herodias. Herodias had been married to Philip the Tetrarch, a son of Herod the Great, but perhaps Philip was too wimpy or a loser or too peace-loving. Ice ran in her veins. Herodias was attracted to Philip's brother Herod. It is probable that Philip was not ruthless enough for her, since there seems to have been some compassion or other good quality in him. The family dynamic is interesting. Herodias was the daughter of another of their brothers, which meant she was a granddaughter of Herod the Great and Philip and Herod were brothers of her father. Named after her grandfather, she may have enjoyed some favoritism and may have gotten more privilege than her cousins. By the time we meet her, we see that she is a piece of work: her lust for power is very clear, and she had joined with Herod in killing her husband Philip. Herod married her, but it was not a marriage made in heaven, for two reasons. 1) John the Baptist ranted on and on in his public preaching about their marriage as incestuous. He preached on the street, and repeatedly called her names— "harlot" being the politest of them. We are told that Herodias hated John the Baptist, but she could do nothing about that because Herod both feared and was attracted to John and his message. Herodias persuaded her husband to arrest and imprison John, but beyond that she had no power, for they were not ruling jointly. Let's imagine that even in prison John did not shut up about her, so the guards and others heard what he said and repeated it around the capital. They could lock John up, but they could not shut him up. Herod did what he could to appease his vengeful wife, but he let John the Baptist live.

That was the second reason that this marriage was not made in heaven, for Herodias wanted a husband who was as ruthless as she was, so that there would

be no limits to evil. There was still something in Herod that had not been gripped and subsumed by evil. He could see righteousness in John, and somehow John's preaching spoke to his heart.

Then Herod's birthday came around and he gave an elaborate banquet for many friends and other courtiers. "Little Herodias," the queen's daughter, came in to dance and whatever she did, Herod was overwhelmed, essentially granting her absolute power for a day. Little Herodias had no idea what to do, so she asked Mom, and this was the opportunity for Big Herodias to get what she most wanted: revenge. Herod was trapped and embarrassed; he could not go back on his word, which he gave in front of his guests (in which case he would have lost his credibility), and he could not show himself weak in terms of his family by showing bad judgment. We have just heard the gruesome details of the end of that chapter, perhaps more lurid than any episode of the Game of Thrones.

As well-known as this story is, there is a play written by the English poet/playwright/novelist Oscar Wilde in 1891. It was written in French while he lived in France and was not performed in England for some time, because of a law that forbade the performance of any anti-monarchical work in English. In that story, Little Herodias is renamed Salome, and her "dance of the seven veils" in the opera based on this work is perhaps the most well-known dance in the opera repertory. Wilde went far beyond the biblical story, going deep into the human psyche to describe revenge, obsession, mania, rage and a number of human conditions now known as personality disorders. It's a brilliant play but takes the story in a different direction entirely. One bit of humor: it was very difficult for opera directors to cast a soprano who could sing and dance the role of Salome, trying to find someone whose body was not as large as her voice. Not pretty when the veils come off. That would be like getting a huge tenor to sing Peter Pan. [I want to be fair here.]

Why does Mark include this story? It does tell us how John the Baptist was finally removed from the scene, yet there are a great number of details in it for a story that is not directly about Jesus. We are told about John's imprisonment, the dance, the beheading—all of which happened months before the day this was told. It goes to show the devastating power of revenge—that when we give ourselves over to it, it destroys our souls. It is bad enough to hang onto anger and

refuse to forgive, for that entraps us forever in some past events and does not allow us to live freely. However, at any time, we may be released from that confinement in a moment of divine grace. To seek revenge is to deny that there can even be grace and to commit to a willingness to deliver the alternative by whatever word we want to name it. Herodias has some sisters in cruelty: Jezebel and Delilah in Hebrew scripture, some in Greek myths, and Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. They are the human embodiment of the witches in more fantastical stories in early literature. We, the audience, get to see a person whose soul—if she still has one—has no redeeming qualities, no tenderness, no vulnerability to be reached by another's love, and no capacity or desire to give love to another. Generally, on the world stage, characters like this have been male, which makes us shudder all the more in a female character whom we generally assume to be more caring.

We also see here that there are times when it seems that evil wins the day, as is the case with John's death. No matter Herod's attraction to John's goodness, to the truth John preaches, to the hope he exudes, Herod does not stand up against this force of evil and it wins—at least for this battle, at least for this day. Was Herod drunk from the wine at his own party? Perhaps, but that's no excuse.

Herod's job, his role as King was to stand up for the good of the whole, for the social health of his country, and at that banquet he made a promise that put his country's ethics on the line—and the security and safety of having an ethic, a healthy set of norms. No leader has a right to do that. In government, in the Church, in the military, even in business, we take oaths and make promises to value and uphold the offices we hold (we serve those offices), and this is not for our own sakes but for the good of the whole. It is only in dictatorships, in absolutist forms of government where that gets terribly blurred, so much so that others in the organization lose their moral compass and become a cheerleading squad for the one who can give out favors (be they rewards or pardons) and who can delegate authority, not by merit but by favoritism.

This story is not really about either Big Herodias or Little Herodias. It is about Herod. Little Herodias was a pawn, and no matter how over-sexualized she may have been (as some critics surmise), she was at that young age where she had no idea of the consequences and ramifications of her mother's directive. There are

those in business, in government, who—no matter how very skilled and gifted they are in a particular field or arena, no matter how much intellectual brilliance they have—are still naïve and can be easily duped and led by the nose and let astray. Not so with Big Herodias. She knew exactly what she wanted and exactly what she was doing. For some time, she had been looking and waiting for it, and when the opportunity came, she did not hesitate, she pounced, and her claws, her teeth and her venom did their job.

We are living in a time in history when there are many manifestations of this evil dynamic being played out, both small scale and large scale. We see it all over the world, and it is nearest to us right here in our own country.

Among the hallmarks of this condition are the following:

- 1) There is a sense of entitlement among many: “when I want something I have the right to get it, and now.”
- 2) There is a sense of inequality and a justification of the rightness of that: “I count more than you do.”
- 3) There are some leaders who inflame entitlement into resentment, and further inflame that into rage and beyond that into violence.”
- 4) There is an undermining of any shared sense of the common good, i.e., the good which undergirds not some but all of humanity.
- 5) There is a passivity in the face of evil and injustice that doesn’t and cannot even shake a Herod out of his complicity.

Some thirty years ago, my then-Senior Warden gave me a wonderful piece of art and calligraphy, a line from Dante’s Inferno. (I hasten to add, she meant it as a compliment). It reads: “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, do nothing.”

A part of me wishes that were true, the part of me that thinks not living righteously should always saddle one with appropriate negative and painful consequences, the part of me that likes the idea of revenge. But the greater part of me, the part that affirms and tries to live by faith, to live in hope, and trying to live out the love *that I have been given to give away* knows that God doesn’t consign or sentence anyone to hell. Yet we may do it to ourselves.

There are two versions of hell that seem most prevalent in our human thinking. There is Jean-Paul Sartre's hell as described in his play "No Exit," where hell is "the others," all those humans who drive us crazy with their neediness and pettiness and selfishness and narcissism. It is the hell of being smothered and suffocated. The alternative is to become totally isolated with no relationships, no stimulation, no interaction. I am sure there are slight variations of these. But HELL seems to be either suffocation or isolation and loneliness.

Our call from God as humans is always to seek to come together and be one. This call for unity permeates Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And we seem always to have three choices or paths for doing so:

- 1) Take over others by force, and rule by force, taking as few prisoners as possible because they are too expensive to maintain. In other words, diminish the value of each and every human being.
- 2) Whatever side you take in a conflict, outdo your rival in what behaviors you are willing to stoop to, what ethics you are willing to discard, what loyalties are too expensive to continue. In other words, diminish the values that establish and develop community and undergird a healthy society.
- 3) Take a lesson from John the Baptist: speak up when you see and encounter evil; speak up again and again and again, even when you know the consequences are dire, even when the cost may be your life. In other words, fight like hell and do no harm.

We Christians are often bidden to ask, "WWJD?" "What Would Jesus Do?" Well, what would Jesus do? What will you do? *Amen.* *+JLJ*