



Pastor Gwen's Sermon
8th Sunday after Pentecost
"Pressures"
Sunday, July 14, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

In our Gospel lesson this morning we are given what you might call a "Flashback" by Mark. Here we are in the midst of Jesus ministry of healing and miracles, and all of a sudden, we go back to the beheading of John the Baptist. Evidently, Mark thinks that it is important for us to know exactly what happened to John. And so, we flash back to this point in history. I think we should take a good look at the story.

King Herod Antipas sent his men to arrest John and put him in prison. John was speaking truth about how Herod should not have married Herodias, as she was his brother's wife. The Herod family tree is both complex and disturbing. Herod the Great married several women who bore him seven sons. Herodias is the daughter of one of the seven sons and marries two of the other seven sons- which means that both of her husbands are also her uncles. Wow! No wonder John was speaking against this marriage. And no wonder Herodias disliked John for saying so. Great plot for a soap opera: Herod's Place or The Young and the Restless Herods or maybe All Herod's Children.

Well, the story goes that King Herod held a birthday bash for himself. He did not have any friends, so he invited key officers in his army and people he needed to impress. And Herodias sends in her daughter to dance for the men. I can only guess that the dance by beautiful young Salome was quite arousing and by entertainment standards of the day, most likely a licentious dance that most fathers would quickly stop. But Herod did no such thing. The Herod family is known for its debaucheous behavior. And so, Herod offers her "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom".

Understand here that half of his kingdom is not his to sell. Herod Antipas, or King Herod in this story has no authority to give or sell the lands over which he rules. For our King Herod is really only a tetrarch, or one of four rulers. Actually, he was more like a governor with limited authority not even able to give away one acre. Three of his brothers ruled over different parts of the Kingdom. And they too had no ownership rights. Herod, in the back of his mind, is probably wishing he had never said that he would give her land.

Well, young and innocent Salome does not know what to ask for and she seeks her mother's advice. Herodias, who most likely set up this whole scenario, tells her daughter to answer that she wants John the Baptizer's head. Herod is stuck making good on her request even though he sees something in John that interests him. Scripture tells us, "The king was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her." Verse 26 So, Herodias is

about to finally get rid of John the Baptist and interestingly, Salome adds her own personal touch "on a platter". What a macabre thing to see at a birthday banquet. Glad I did not get an invite! What are we supposed to do with this Flashback birthday party? What do you think we can learn from this rather disgusting flashback?

Personally, I think that we can learn about making good choices. Or going even deeper on another angle, we can learn about giving in to pressure. The big pressure we see here is Herod giving in to the expectations of the crowd and his wife and daughter. Herod was in a sense a tragic figure. He was boxed into a corner by his own pride. He could not retreat from the promise he made to Salome in front of all those powerful men. He couldn't retreat so he had to follow through with granting the promise. He was sad, he was guilty, he was ashamed, but he could not back down. But he had to follow through, so he ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod gave in to pressure for he had no backbone. In our lives when the world clamors for us to do something not right, we need to have a backbone and stand up to those pressures. We cannot give in.

I read a story this week written by Brian Stoffregen. It is a story about two men and how they handled pressure in their lives. There were 2 brothers in Georgia during the 1950's. One decided that in opposition to the dominant culture of the day, he was going to support and participate in the formation of a multi-ethnic community. The other worked as an attorney for a prominent law firm. Both were Christians and attended church regularly.

As the multi-ethnic community formed and social pressure forced them into court proceedings, the one brother asked his attorney brother to help them with the legal work. The brother refused, saying that he could lose his job. The pressure increased to help with a reminder that he was a Christian. The lawyer responded, "I will follow Jesus to his cross, but it is his cross. I have no need to be crucified." To this his brother replied, "Then you are an admirer of Jesus, but not his disciple."

The one brother was willing to follow Jesus and his teaching no matter what happened to his life. He would not bow to the pressures of in this case, segregation. He wanted to see people from all walks of life living and working together.

A disciple needs to be free from the pressures of the world. A disciple of Jesus needs to be aware of peer pressure and when it goes against the teachings of Jesus, a disciple needs to steer clear of it. It is one thing to say we are a disciple of Jesus and another to live the life of a disciple. What I tell the confirmation students when we study the Holy Spirit is that The Spirit of God is the little voice that sits on your shoulder when the world is hollering to you in the other ear. But Holy Spirit is doing more than just telling you right from wrong. He will lead you in the right direction to have a full life with God, one that will always give you joy.

Another character in our story Salome was also under pressure from her mother. I would imagine that she might have wished for something else other than John's head: Riches. A glamorous house. Servants. But she caved into the pressures of her scheming mother, Herodias.

And Herodias in turn, gave in to the pressure of hate in her heart for John. She knew John spoke the truth about her marriage and hated him for it. She was living in a sinful marriage. Her desire for power that came with living with Herod, caused her to do anything she could to marry him, even though he was her uncle!

So, you see, Herod, Salome and Herodias all gave in to pressure of the world that got them to do things that were certainly wrong and against God.

In the following modern parable, each person gave in to their own internal pressures, combined with the pressures of the world. I cannot give credit to someone for this interesting story as the author is unknown.

"There are six people gathered around a dying campfire on a dark and bitter night. Each one has a stick or a log, which they might place on the fire. But, sadly, one by one they decide not to give what they had to keep the fire going. The lone woman does not give because there is a black man in the circle. The penniless tramp does not give because in that circle there is a member of the idle rich. The rich man does not give because he reasons his contribution would obviously help someone who was lazy and shiftless. Another didn't give because one of the six didn't belong to his church. The black man hung tight to his wood, because it was his way of getting even or back at all the whites. Still another would not give because he believed in giving only to those who also gave. And each one felt if he or she were asked to give with a personal invitation, or if they knew the need was really great, then they would give.

The parable ends with these words: "Six logs held fast in death's hand was proof of human sin, the sin of pride, ego, and selfishness. They didn't die from the cold of that night, the cold without. They died from the cold within each heart."

Those six folks died because they gave into the pressures in their lives. They were not any different than Herod, Salome, and Herodias. I suspect not any different than you and me on certain occasion.

John, on the other hand stood his ground. He preached a message of repentance till the day he died. He did not jump through the hoops of the religious folks. That we find evidence of even in the clothes he wore and the locusts he ate. John was focused on telling the story of Jesus even as He led the way for Him. He did not yield to pressures or practices of the people.

Jesus led his life being the Father's Son, which eventually led him to the cross. And for the sake of the world, the resurrection followed. Jesus too did not let the pressures of the world stop his ministry. It was God's plan totally fulfilled by His Only Son.

Both John and Jesus, knew they drew strength from their lives because they were totally rooted and grounded in God's love. No worldly pressures could ever be greater than the grace and love God has for each one of us.

I hope you will make good choices in your lives and never give into the pressures of the world, the pressures of the devil. Instead, always choose Jesus. He will help you fend off pressure and the wrongs of the world and grant you a rich life in His kingdom. No flashback needed if we just believe, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the only life we will ever need, So choose Jesus!

Amen