

John the Baptist and Herod

Lord, thank you for the people you have divinely placed in my life who speak holy truth, love and words of wisdom. Give me a heart of discernment to know when you are using someone to speak instruction into my heart, and give me the strength and courage to follow through with that advice, even when it's hard. Fill me with peace in knowing that even if I take a wrong turn, Your purpose will prevail. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Tracie Miles

When I got out of college in 1961, I went to work for a small aerospace firm in Boston. At the time they had a staff of about 30 engineers of various flavors: electrical, mechanical, reliability, environmental, and so on. Of those thirty, only one was a woman. That kind of unbalance would be considered outrageous today, and rightfully so.

To get on a soapbox for a moment, my experience, and various studies suggest that men and women working together collaboratively tend to produce far more creative results than either gender working separately. Men and women think differently, and that is their great strength.

Unfortunately, nobody thought that way in those days. Engineers were men, and that's the way it was. Our one exception was Grace, who, like John the Baptist, was an outspoken person. She was in her early forties then - ten or fifteen years older than most of the technical staff. She had started her career as a purchasing agent at the Quincy Naval Shipyard during the Korean war. Then, in the mid-fifties, she decided to get into the aerospace business and joined the purchasing department at our company. Once there, she had an epiphany - Plastics - just like Dustin Hoffman in the movie *The Graduate*, except Grace was more interested in gluing things together. Anyway, she used her position in the purchasing department to collect every data sheet, instruction manual, and application note she could get her hands on for every kind of epoxy and silicone adhesive on the market. Pretty soon, the walls of her cubicle were lined with bookcases full of arcane data. Grace must have had a photographic memory, because she not only collected the information, but she studied it until she knew almost everything by heart.

Pretty soon word got out that Grace knew more about glueing stuff together than anybody else around, and engineers began to sidle into her office, looking for advice, like, "What can I get that will glue a piece of quartz to a piece of plastic, and will withstand 50,000 volts at -40 degrees centigrade in outer space?" Now, you or I might not have the answer to that question on the tip of our tongues, but Grace did. She could come up with two or three possibilities without batting an eye.

After a few months of acting as the company's unofficial glue guru, Grace went to the vice president and pointed out that the company needed an engineer for that kind of thing, and she was the perfect candidate. Her suggestion did not go over well with the upper level management. I suppose they thought she was being pushy, but their excuse was that she didn't have a degree. Their answer wasn't a problem - for Grace, anyway. She simply went back to her office, packed up all her data sheets, and stopped answering questions.

Now, engineers tend to be pragmatists who like to go with what works. They also tend to be a bit lazy. After all, who wants to spend a week researching something when you can walk down the hall and have Grace give you the answers in twenty minutes?

As it happened, it only took a delegation of angry engineers about twenty minutes to cave

in the vice president and have Grace installed as a plastics engineer. There are many ways of speaking truth to power.

It was a tough row to hoe for Grace, even so. Prejudice and tradition die hard, and there were those who referred to her as “Auntie Grace,” and tried to belittle and ignore her professionally. One or two engineers, if they didn’t want to discuss something with Grace, got into the habit of ducking into the men’s room when they saw her coming. That unfortunate practice came to an abrupt end when she began to follow them in.

I think of Grace as a kind of modern day John the Baptist, only more devious. She may not have lost her head, physically or figuratively, but like anybody who chooses to challenge the status quo, she suffered willingly for her beliefs. All of which leads me to today’s Gospel reading.

Those of you of a certain age may remember The Lone Ranger on radio and TV, where the show always ended with the townspeople staring off into the sunset and saying, “Who was that masked man anyway?”

In the first part of today’s Gospel, people start asking the same kind of question about the ministry of Jesus and the disciples. Who was he, anyway? Everybody had their own theory as to who Jesus really was, based on their individual hopes and fears. Some hoped that he might be one of the great prophets of old, like Elijah, come back to set them free from Roman tyranny. Others hoped he might be the voice of God, unheard since Old Testament times. Herod, probably with a twinge of guilt and fear, thought he must be John the Baptist risen from the dead.

It’s human nature for people to see what they expect, and feel most comfortable, seeing. The real question that we don’t ask often enough, though, isn’t what’s comfortable to see, but what does God want us to see? Enter John the Baptist, challenging us, and making us uncomfortable.

Before looking at the second part of the reading, I have to give you some bad news. There were a lot of Herods in biblical times, and as near as I can tell, none of the family would have qualified for a Boy Scout merit badge. The commentaries I’ve read refer to Herod Antipas, as a weak, fearful, and impetuous man. Like many people of that sort, he hid his true self behind a facade of bullying and petty cruelty.

With that in mind, we go to a magnificent, Hollywood style, flashback - a towering, dramatic scene filled with fear, deceit, palace intrigue, go-go dancing, and a gruesome murder. What more could anyone ask for in a movie?

Of course, Herod’s impulsiveness and Salome’s dance moves get him into trouble during his birthday extravaganza.

But something more important was going on as well.

One would think that Herod, who apparently had the morals of a rabid weasel, would have no interest at all in John the Baptist’s teachings. Yes, he kept John alive because he was afraid of the uproar that might take place if he was killed, but there must have been something more to their relationship. The Gospel tells us that when Herod heard John speak, he was “greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.” It’s easy to imagine Herod creeping off to the dungeon in the dark of night when nobody was looking, to hear the Baptist’s message.

Maybe John’s words caused Herod to see things more clearly, to get a glimpse of things

he'd never thought about before. Sort of like the time I put on my first pair of glasses as a child, and suddenly saw leaves on the trees and ants on the ground instead of just a blur.

The bible doesn't say that Herod ever repented, but the important thing to me is that he did listen to John. At least to some degree he resisted the very human temptation to stay in his comfort zone and ignore the other side.

It's easy to think that John the Baptist came out on the short end of this story. He did lose his head, after all. But think about it from a different perspective, God's perspective. Two thousand years later, we're sitting in a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, a man and a prophet who spoke up for what he saw as right, telling truth to a tyrant, even at the cost of his life. I don't know of any St. Herod's church, or even any Herod Antipas municipal buildings.

I don't think one doesn't have to be special to speak a prophetic word, even if it's just a word of encouragement to a lone woman engineer. After all, John the Baptist was a pretty nondescript person, eating locust and honey before he was called.

I've read that few times in our country's history has the country been as divided as it is today. As alarming as that is to me, the good news is that challenging times tend to produce prophetic voices.

In fact, today's climate seems to have produced a surplus of competing prophets; I'm using the word "prophet" loosely here. While I applaud some of them, I'm tempted to behead others. But that urge to behead the other side is a tempting trap, like Salome's dance. I know that it's a trap, but still it's so much easier to tune out the other side, to hide in the men's room so to speak, rather than face those I don't understand or agree with.

It's hard for me to accept the idea that the prophet who makes me the most uncomfortable is the one I need to pay the most attention to, for that prophet is the one who forces me to examine, understand, and articulate my own beliefs. I may end up changing my mind - though probably not - but either way, no matter where I end up, listening to both sides is a blessing. I keep having to remind myself that Herod may have been perplexed when he listened to John, but he did listen. Surely I can bring myself to do the same.

Amen