

Proper 10B
Mark 6:14-29
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Speaking the Truth

As many of you know, this is my second Sunday at Holy Spirit and I look forward to coming to know you all in the upcoming weeks. So wear your nametags! Or keep reminding me of your name. I'll do my best to get all your names down as quickly as possible. It is so good to be here, serving in this community.

Jesus' name has become known. Although Jesus had been rejected in his own hometown, the word is out and spreading. He is known to have completed great works of power, miracles. And Jesus has sent out the twelve, empowering his followers to be disciples. Great works are being accomplished in Jesus' name. So the people are asking, "Who is Jesus?" Even the elite, the powerful, have heard of Jesus and want to know . . . Who is this man? Is he Elijah? A prophet? Herod himself asks, "is he John, whom I beheaded, that has been raised?"

Today's lesson from Mark's Gospel interrupts the story of Jesus and his disciples with a lengthy detailed flashback about the death of John the Baptist. Only here do we hear the full story of the intrigue of Herod's court, of scandal, manipulation, and the absolute abuse of power. Herod's wife detested John, for John told the truth, the truth of Herod's sinful marriage to Herodias, according to Torah. So Herod had John arrested. But the arrest didn't stop Herod's fascination with the Baptizer. Herod loved to listen to John, recognizing that there was something different about this man, something that was righteous and holy.

But Herod's protection only went so far, for at a great birthday banquet, in front of important guests, Herod had fallen into a trap. He's trapped by his pride, his status, his position. He's unable, *or unwilling*, to back down from an ill-made promise. So although we hear Herod was "*deeply grieved*," he concedes to the norms, he silently acquiesces, he acts as the world expects. Herod enables truly gruesome events to unfold and John the Baptist is killed for speaking the truth. The unfortunate reality is that Herod's choice was the easier one for him to make, placing reputation and station ahead of righteousness and truth.

This story of John the Baptist is not just as a flashback, but also a sign, a foreshadowing. Jesus has being compared to John by Herod and others. John has preached the truth, stood in opposition to the status quo, and has been arrested and killed by Herod. Jesus, too, preaches the truth, challenges the established way of life, and, in his own time, also will be arrested and killed by Pilate. So too, the disciples will preach the truth and be persecuted by those in authority, those concerned with maintaining the status quo. There is a warning here, a warning about suffering, a warning about the opposition to be faced by those who follow Jesus. *Discipleship is hard* and Mark's gospel gives us a view of what it can mean to follow our Lord. For as Christ-followers, we too are called to speak the truth.

This week the legislature in SC approved removing the Confederate flag from the Statehouse grounds. On Friday, the flag was removed, ending 54 years of its display at the Capitol. This is a big step for SC, a new day, a day that could only come because people were willing to speak the truth, to acknowledge that this flag does carry the stigma of white supremacy and racism.

As Christians we need to speak the truth. Removing a flag is only a *start* in addressing the reality that we do not *yet* live in a world without racism. We gathered here two weeks ago as a community to talk, with a *spirit* of reconciliation, in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. My heart still breaks as I recall some of the shared stories . . . an African-American colleague and his family who are still fearful of driving and spending time in Forsyth . . . a mother's pain as she repeated her son's words, "Mom, it's really hard to be black." We still have brothers and sisters who do not have the same privileges or opportunities, are not afforded the same dignity as others, based on the color of their skin.

What can we do? How can we actively participate in healing and reconciliation? We can speak the truth. We can break the silence, for silence is NOT a way to express opposition. *Silence* is NOT a way to express opposition.

- Silence doesn't say "I don't agree with you" when someone spews a racial slur
- Silence doesn't say, "I think differently" when a conversation has sunk into prejudicial and stereotypical labeling
- Silence doesn't say that as Christians we recognize Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Being a disciple is hard. It's hard to speak the truth, to voice concerns that can make others feel uncomfortable, concerns that highlight that we choose to think, believe, and act differently. It is hard to stand up and speak the truth about words and actions, practices and behaviors, that diminish others, about unjust systems that perpetuate unequal treatment of God's people. It's hard to speak out for change and moving beyond the status quo. Our reality is much closer to Herod's than we may like...for isn't it far easier to walk away from what we know to be right, when it's not ourselves, but someone else, some other, who has a problem?

But that is our mission as the Body of Christ. We are all called to be part of Jesus' work of reconciliation and healing. We are all called to actively listen to others, to share, in love, our Savior's deep desire that as God's people, we respect the dignity of all God's beloved children. We face choices as we live out each and every day. We can keep silent, making concessions for convenience, concessions for convention, or we can choose to live into God's message of love, justice, and peace.

And there is good news, for Jesus is always with us. There is great hope for the future, great promise of new life in Christ. This chapter of Mark does not end with John's death during Herod's ghastly banquet, but continues on to Jesus' feeding of the 5000 with only a few loaves and fishes. Our Lord and Savior is with us. He nourishes us, he feeds us. Coming to this Eucharistic table strengthens us for our work in the world. Living and working together in community enables us to strive together for justice and peace among all people.

With God's help we can grow in the Spirit. With God's help, we can continue in our work of discipleship, spreading the good news of God in Christ. With God's help, we can choose to tell the truth.