

**July 11, 2021 Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Retributive Justice**

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God

Mahatma Gandhi said a lot of things worth remembering, but there's controversy as to whether he said this, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth will soon make the world blind and toothless." There is agreement that when asked what he thought of Western Civilization he said, "I think it would be a good idea." I had an Egyptian friend who explained to me why he chose to embrace Christianity even though he was raised Moslem. I expected him to tell me how faith in Jesus was superior to Islam because that's what I was always taught. He said, well I met a lot of my fellow Egyptian expatriates at the Coptic Church and since Christianity is every bit as good as Islam it seemed like conversion was no big deal. What if he was right? There were burning questions his statement set alight. Where does that leave the Church Triumphant? Is

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there salvation apart from Jesus? Who killed Colonel Mustard in the drawing room with the candle stick?

In my day we sent missionaries out to convert the heathen. Then Korean Christians started showing up here to convert us heathen Americans to Christianity. Meanwhile we went beyond the ecumenical to embrace inter-faith projects that make life better for all who are downtrodden. Our face in the world at large isn't always a good one. Ethics is a cornerstone of our parent faith, Judaism. While Paul and others worked to pry us loose from using the law as a club to batter ourselves and others he was aware that our responsibilities to the world involve being guided by that law. We have been guilty of ignoring Paul's admonition to the Galatians: ^{Galatians 5:13} "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."

Freedom is never absolute because we are never alone in the world. My freedom ends where yours begins and your freedom ends where mine begins. If I in power draw the lines so that I get to do whatever I want then you will be limited. I fear we have forgotten as a people that freedom is a negotiated element of society. As Christians we are not obligated to follow the law in order to gain salvation, we are saved in order to follow such laws that care for and encourage others. When others share those ethics we can have common cause. In our public face are we as good as Islam, or Judaism, or Taoism, or Shinto? Are we using our freedom to justify behaviors that make us inferior to those other faiths? I do not suggest we run to Buddhism, although they do have that amazing golden statue up 209, but that we make sure to be at least as good as.

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The central message of Jesus, and the Church Parents, is one of forgiveness. It runs contrary to human evolution and our social contract. If you do a bad thing you must suffer consequences. After all that's how the natural world works. You taunt the bear she will not forgive you. If you step off the cliff gravity will not overlook your misstep. These do not have the volition we humans have gained with our big brains and complex societies. The natural eye for an eye can only be just if you are a genetic match and a transplant can be arranged. Now that would be one for the courts. Anyway, we are not supposed to merely overlook bad behavior but to apply pressures that fall short of retribution. The Middle East, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the Republic of the Congo. are fine examples of the effects of retribution. How far back do we go to make sure all the scores are settled and no-one benefited from the violence they committed – Cain and Able? Northern Ireland where us Presbyterians were blown up and blew up Catholics since the reign of good Queen Bessy finally had to say, “Enough is enough.” I hope Northern Ireland remains an example of Christians being at least as good as other faiths in making for peace.

Herod was devoted to retributive justice. If you crossed him he would make you pay. He shared this attitude with his Roman overlords. So when it happened that he ordered John the Baptist be murdered he did what we all do and imposed his image on God. So if Herod demands an eye for an eye, or being king your whole head for an eye, what would King God require? John did nothing to Herod to justify his death sentence, yet John is dead. This was not an execution, it was murder. What better response than for God to send John back with a vengeance? Jesus was sent in part as a response to the death of John, but not finger Herod for murder. He came so that we all might have

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abundant life. Like those Mormon PSAs used to say, “forgive him, it will teach him a lesson.”

Closing Prayer: Eternal God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and in the beauty of human life. Touched by your hand, our world is holy. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share our blessings with our sisters and brothers, and to experience the joy of life in your presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.