

“Telling the Truth with Love in Your Heart”

Based on Mark 6:14-29

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The gospel of Mark is a story that's told in a hurry. In chapter one alone we are introduced to John the Baptist, and then at verse 9 we read of Jesus being baptized by John. Jesus' time in the wilderness is dealt with in two verses. Then we read of him calling his first disciples, healing several people, preaching all through Galilee, all of this in 31 more verses. The haste of the telling throughout the gospel is enhanced by the liberal use of the word “immediately.” Mark is the shortest gospel. It is told with an economy of words and with sparse detail. It's almost like this gospel is an outline version that the teller has to then elaborate to fill in the detail.

But today we hear a story that is full of detail. This story is almost 1/3 as long as the first chapter. There are a number of characters that interact with each other. But Jesus is somewhat behind the scenes. His shadow is cast over the story even though he is not one of the people involved.

The story begins by reporting on who people thought Jesus was. People were saying Jesus was like John, or like Elijah, or like one of the prophets of old. But Herod was convinced Jesus was like John, like a reincarnated John. Specifically, he says that Jesus is John raised from the dead. We then hear about what Herod and John's relationship was like, and how Herod ended up executing John. In this story we learn of Herod's wife Herodias, who had been married to Herod's brother, Phillip. Apparently Phillip divorced Herodias and Herod then married her, his former sister-in-law. We have Herodias' daughter from her relationship with Phillip, which makes her Herod's niece, now step-daughter, dancing at his birthday party. Although it is not explicitly stated, it is assumed that she danced in a provocative manner, which is gross to have your niece dance that way. But that's how messed up this whole situation is. All this is taking place in the presence of Herod's court and a bunch of other aristocrats and powerful people. This story portrays the debauched and vicious immorality of the elites, of which

John the Baptist is the exact opposite, being by Herod's own admission a righteous and holy man, a man who had the courage to tell Herod to his face that his marriage to Herodias was a scandal.

What do you think Mark was up to by including this story? He barely said anything about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness and said nothing about Jesus' birth, yet presents this extended and highly detailed story about John and his execution. Why was this story so important to Mark? I see this story doing a few things for Mark, a story that serves a number of purposes.

First, it serves as a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus. Herodias wanted John killed because of the things he was saying about her, that he was calling out her wickedness, but she couldn't do it. The religious leaders wanted to put Jesus to death because of the things he said about them, how he called out their sin, but they did not have the means to do it. Herod protected John, knowing that he was a righteous man. He enjoyed hearing what he had to say even though what he said often left him perplexed. Pontius Pilate protected Jesus, knowing that he had done nothing deserving of death. He was perplexed by the things Jesus said, or didn't say in his silence. Because of the vow he had made before his court, Herod felt compelled to execute John, even though he didn't want to do it. Because of the crowd and the pressure applied by the religious leaders, Pilate had Jesus executed even though he really didn't want to do it. So you see how this account of John's execution has a number of parallels with Jesus' execution.

This story also serves as a contrast to what Jesus and John were up to. John and Jesus are holy and righteous men while Herod and Herodias are unholy and unrighteous. Herod's birthday feast turned into a macabre display as John's head is brought in on a platter. Meanwhile, Jesus is feeding the five thousand. His last supper with his disciples initiates a new covenant that brings about life. Two very different banquets. And that's the biggest contrast. The scene of Herod's birthday party depicts debauchery and death. But Jesus' banquet with his disciples is all about his sacrifice that brings about forgiveness and new life. Herod and Herodias are all about debauchery and death. But John and Jesus are all about repentance, holiness, healing, and life.

And this is what I want us to focus on today. I want us to pay attention to what John was doing and why it got him into trouble. Of all that Mark was doing with this story, I think he takes the time to tell us what John did so that John can be a model, a source of inspiration, for the followers of Jesus. It would do us well to pay attention to what John is doing and wonder if this is something we can do.

What we see in John is that he was a truth teller in spite of the risk to his own person. Whether he was intimidated or not, John would not give King Herod a pass for his wickedness. If Herod was doing something immoral or beneath his dignity, John would call him out on it. It didn't matter if Herod was president, I mean king. John spoke out and called out immoral behavior, no matter who you were or how much power or status you had. No one was untouchable for John's righteous indignation. And he would not stop. He made a pest of himself. He would not be silenced. And as a consequence, Herodias took the opportunity given to her to have John's head cut off so she no longer had to hear his condemning voice, a voice that spoke the truth. For John, telling the truth about things was worth risking your life. And as history shows us, to be a truth teller is a risky proposition.

But John wasn't a truth teller because he had a big ego. He wasn't an obnoxious know-it-all who gleefully pontificated about everyone else's moral failures. John was no bully, knocking people down so that he could feel superior. John was also not a moralist. He was not holier-than-thou, or some kind of puritan prude. Again, John was not about presenting himself as morally superior to all other people. Nor was he a hypocrite. Herod himself acknowledged that he was righteous and holy. John not only called out bad behavior, he lived a righteous life. His hypocrisy was minimal. The way he lived his life gave him the authority to call out those who were in need of repentance. In other words, John was a credible truth teller because he lived by the truth that he proclaimed. His life matched his words. He was a person of integrity.

But not only did John have integrity, I think that John was driven to speak the truth because he knew that right living was the best kind of life. He knew that living a life consistent with moral precepts leads to a better quality of life. Not that life won't have challenges, pain, and

tragedy. But it will be better, fuller, more vibrant. I mean, look what we have here. Herod is married to his former sister-in-law while her ex-husband Phillip, Herod's brother, is still alive. How humiliating this must have been for Phillip. How disrespectful Herod was and shameful Herodias was. It's a messed up relationship that generates a bad vibe. It's weird for Herodias' daughter, whose uncle is now her step-dad. And she goes out there dancing for his pleasure. Doesn't the whole scene make you recoil? This is Jerry Springer territory. And this is the aristocracy, the ones who are supposed to be the guardians of the tradition and all that is good and honorable.

What I'm trying to say is, John called Herod out, not to prove a point, not to stroke his ego or be a trouble maker, not out of any sense of animosity or disrespect, but because John loved Herod. He knew that Herod's life would be so much better if he got out of this relationship, repented, made things right with his brother. He knew that if Herod would repent, that is life would be so much better. This is what drove John to call people out and to call them into repentance and living a holy life. It was love that drove John to be a truth teller. Not animosity. Not hate. Not ego or a need to feel superior. It was love, knowing that a right living life is the best life. John knew that facing up to your moral failure, repenting, and committing to living a holy life is the pathway toward healing.

So who are you in this story? Maybe you resonate with Herod. He knew he wasn't living right. He respects the man who tells the truth about his life. But he's not willing to repent and when push comes to shove is willing to shut John up permanently. Do you resonate with Herodias? You have no use for people that are calling you out for the way you are living. Free to judge others you are quick to shut down anyone who dares to judge you.

Honestly, we generally don't like being told the truth about ourselves. We don't like to have our stuff called out. We don't go to the extent of cutting people's heads off. But we do cut *people* off in other ways. We stop talking to them or hanging out with them. We change the subject and keep our conversations on the surface instead of talking

about things that matter. We “unfriend” people on Facebook. We can cut off truth tellers in a variety of ways.

Who do you *need* to be? I think we all wish we were a bit more like John. We want to be truth tellers, calling people out for their wrong doing and calling them in to repentance and living a better way, and to do that truth telling not from a place of arrogance, or self-righteousness, or as the morality police, but out of a place of love, convinced that a life lived right is the best kind of life, knowing that repentance is a key step toward healing. At least, that’s who I want to be more like. I want to become less like Herod and more like John. I hope you do too.

Herod thought he had shut John up by having his head cut off. But here comes Jesus, who is John raised from the dead. Another holy man, speaking truth, and calling for people to repent. John may be dead, but the message of John continues. Herod can’t stop the truth being spoken. He can’t stop the call to repentance from happening. The healing work of God, to turn the world around, bringing forth new life, it can’t be stopped.

The story prior to this one about John is the account of Jesus sending his disciples out two by two, scattering them to all the towns around with the same message Jesus was giving and with the authority to cast out demons and to bring healing to those who are sick. Not only is John’s message of repentance continued by Jesus, it is multiplied. And it’s not just a call to repentance, it is acts that bring about real healing. People are being redeemed and made whole, experiencing new life.

Throughout the centuries and all around the world, truth tellers and healing workers keep coming. God’s work of redemption will not be stopped. Whatever obstacles are thrown in the way of God’s healing work, whether it be the execution of John, the crucifixion of Jesus, or the long train of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel, nothing can prevent God’s redeeming, healing, life giving work to continue through the lives and actions of real people, people like you and me.

This is where we find hope. Repentance is always available for us. Each day, each hour, each moment, we can choose to live the right way. And we are always able to join in on God’s healing work, speaking

truth, calling for repentance, demonstrating what a life of love looks like. We are always able to continue the healing work of Jesus through our own actions and way of living.

In U2's recent album, they have a song that Bono wrote to be a source of encouragement. Like many other people who are concerned about the state of politics in the United States and all that is happening in the world, it sometimes feels overwhelming. So Bono wrote this song partly to serve as a source of encouragement for himself when he is feeling discouraged by the state of the world. The title is "Love is bigger than anything in its way." That's one of my takeaways from this story from Mark we have been reflecting on today. This is a truth that can carry us through, a truth that guides us in how to live and grounds us in our living. Love is greater than anything in its way. Out of a place of love, repent from what you need to repent from...speak truth...challenge others to be their better selves...demonstrate what the healing power of love looks like. In the spirit of John, the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God, live a truth telling life, a life that tells the truth of God's unlimited love.