

# “Truth versus Power”

Mark 6:14-29, Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85:8-13, Ephesians 1:3-14

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*Let us pray: Loving God, Let your Spirit be heard. Let your love and justice be known. Amen.*

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Today’s reading of the Gospel of Mark on the surface reads like racy pulp fiction novel. In the story there are struggles for power, adultery, sex, misguided youth, extravagant promises, charges, prison time, and murder. The Gospel story begins with how people confused Jesus with John the Baptist. Then we are told how John the Baptist was murdered, and how there was the struggle of truth versus power.

As Jesus continues his ministry in and beyond Galilee, the political leaders of the day became more aware of the ministry of Jesus. At the same time, in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples of Jesus seem to be less and less aware of what is happening to Jesus.

So that we are aware, a little history is in order. In the New Testament “Herods” are everywhere.

Today’s reading is not about the Herod when Jesus was born. Nor is this about the Herod persecuting the church mentioned in Acts. This is the in between generation, trying to keep and consolidate the power and wealth of the former Herod, Herod the Great. In a move to consolidate the power and wealth, Herod Philip marries his niece, the daughter of his half-brother. (You’re right, it starts to get a little creepy.)

Herod Philip and his wife Herodias have a daughter, Salome. There is no other way to say this than, Herod Philip was a whimp. One of Herod Philip's half-brothers was Herod Antipas, who married a Nabataean princess. Herod Antipas dumps the Nabataean princess and shacks-up with brother Herod Philip's wife, Herodias. The king of the Nabataeans was none too pleased when his daughter was rejected by Herod Antipas. The princess comes home humiliated because she was replaced by Herodias. The king of the Nabataeans goes to war with Herod Antipas and soundly defeats him. Nevertheless, Herod Antipas, even in his embarrassing military defeat, marries Herodias. (Just so you know how dysfunctional this family was in their efforts to keep and consolidate power, later on, young Salome would marry her cousin, leave him and, in her second marriage, she would marry her uncle Philip. Not her uncle Herod Philip, just uncle Philip. As I said, "Herods" are everywhere and it gets a little creepy.)

In the middle of all this history, John the Baptist said to Herod Antipas, "You are sleeping with Herodias, your brother's wife." Now Herod Antipas liked to listen to John the Baptist. Herod Antipas believed John the Baptist was a righteous and holy man. Yet, it seemed to bother Herodias more than Herod Antipas, that John the Baptist was announcing to the world that they were in an adulterous relationship, breaking the laws of Moses. Herodias could not forgive John the Baptist for what he said. Herodias not only held a grudge, she wanted to kill John the Baptist. Because Herod Antipas liked John the Baptist, he was not yet killed but thrown into prison.

Once there was a slender mother and her four-year-old daughter out shopping for a new dress for the mother. The mother held the dress up to her body in front of a store mirror. An obese saleswoman came over and said, "Oh no, that dress won't do, it's just not your color." About that time the little four-year-old daughter came to her mother's defense saying, "Well, if you weren't so fat, you could try it on."

Sometime along life's journey that little girl will get the memo or instruction from her mother that such sayings are unbecoming. Sayings like someone is too fat or too ugly, smells like cigarettes or sweats like a pig, are just not acceptable in many social circles. Well, John the Baptist didn't get that memo or talk from his mother. John the Baptist bluntly said, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." John the Baptist didn't tell a little white lie. He told the truth and he told it to the powers that be, the ones trying to consolidate their power and wealth. That comment of John the Baptist pretty much sealed his fate.

There are two types of people in the world we despise. The first are people who can never be trusted to tell the truth. Their lies make them despised at work. Their friends are in short supply and frequently they are in brief relationships. The second group of people are people who tell us the truth and only tell us the truth. That four-year-old little girl and John the Baptist, fall into this second category. These two groups have not mastered the complex socialization process of just keeping some things to yourself.

John the Baptist's words set into motion what would be a birthday dance for Herod Antipas by his step-daughter, Salome. Foolishly, Herod Antipas made a promise he would not want to keep.

With the prompting of her mother, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Since he was known for breaking his marriage vow to his first wife, Herod Antipas was now in a pickle. He wanted to keep his promise to Salome of anything she wanted, up to one-half of his kingdom. The leaders of Galilee witnessed this promise. Yet, Herod Antipas really liked John the Baptist. The order was given and the head of John the Baptist was presented to young Salome, who gave it to her mother. Herodias had her revenge because of what Herod did not do.

Unlike a pulp fiction novel, this story is not really about the drama of light versus darkness, or good versus evil, or life versus death, or love versus hate. This is a confrontation of the political powers and prophetic faith. It is about

the King and the Baptizer. It is about those who go along just to get along, and those who speak the truth to power. It is about a faith that makes a difference. It is about a faith that makes a difference.

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard once said, “The tyrant dies and his rule ends, the martyr dies and his rule begins.” Even in death God not only raises the dead, God raises new witnesses to take their place.

Perhaps the questions we might ask are, “Who wants your head on a platter?” Or, “What truth is worth your head?” Or, “What truth is worth your life?”

Progressive churches like ours have a long and noble history of speaking truth to the political powers like Herod. In this country there was the fight for the abolition of slavery led by people of faith. It was people of faith who spoke out against the discrimination of people of color in the civil rights struggle. In our lifetime we have witnessed the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights, Black Lives Matter, Antisemitism, and Islamophobia. And it wasn't just churches, there were also synagogues and mosques in the struggle for equality. These people of faith stood up to the political powers because of core values which guided them. They not only knew those core values, they spoke out about them to others.

Hans Christian Anderson told the story of The Emperor's New Clothes. It was the tale about an Emperor who was swindled by two supposed tailors. The supposed tailors claim to sew a new, special suit for the Emperor. It was special because it was said, only those who were wise could see the clothes, while those who were foolish would find them invisible. Not wanting to be labeled a fool, the Emperor pretended he could see the suit, pretended to put it on, and then proceeded to walk around the castle without his clothes. Wanting neither to cross the king, nor be considered fools, all of his advisors and servants pretended to be able to see the clothes and commented on how beautiful they were. As the Emperor led a parade through the city, his loyal subjects say, “ah” and “oh” over clothing they could not see. Everyone was lying, because they were afraid to tell the truth. If they admitted to seeing

the Emperor without his clothes, they would certainly be ridiculed by all their neighbors or considered to be fools. Finally, a little child exposed the deception. One child said of the Emperor, “But he has nothing on!” Those words of truth encouraged others to speak the truth, too.

As you leave this place, speak the truth to power. Speak the truth in love. Amen.

Resources:

All scripture references are from *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the United States of America.

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