

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10) – Year B – July 15, 2009 - Homily
2 Samuel 6: 1-5b, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29
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At home, I have a beautiful set of quarter-geodes. They are sliced and flat on three sides, one being the bottom, and the other two being highly polished. Yet each piece has a curved lunar landscape of crusty rough holes on the outside. They live on my library bookshelf as bookends.

The story of John the Baptist's brutal and capricious beheading is also a story encapsulated in the Gospel of Mark by bookends. In the Gospel these bookend stories help us to understand truly what is going on at Herod's birthday party and how John's death is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own betrayal and death. As we have seen to date in the Gospel accounts, Jesus has been performing great deeds of power, and yet was most recently rejected in His hometown of Nazareth. At best, during His lifetime, no one but Peter even hazarded a guess as to the source of Jesus' power as God's Son. Almost everyone thought that Jesus was just another highly gifted prophet, as the followers of John the Baptist thought John to be as well. The rejection of John the Baptist by Herod has parallels to the rejection of Jesus and His disciples. At the next level, it mirrors the rejection of God's Word by the world.

The key that opens the world of this story for us is another parallel: the difference between divine power and worldly power. It really is no contest. God is the supreme and sovereign Lord of all creation. The problem is that humanity has come to believe in our own god-like power. It is like a tragic misunderstanding of God's gift to us as stewards of creation versus our desire to be rulers of creation. There is only one ruler, and that is our Almighty God. Within these conflicting paradigms of power, we have Jesus' deeds of power feeding God's children, and bringing healing and restoration. Then there is the Herod, the puppet king's banquet, where Herod feels the need to display his own power over life and death, even as he feeds his courtiers, officers and the leaders of Galilee. Against what seems to be his own better judgment, and in order to retain some semblance of control over and amongst his own household, he foolishly seeks to restore his strained relationship with Herodias by acquiescing to her daughter Salome's request for John the Baptist's head on a platter.

Look at the parallels here to Jesus' own death. A weak and foolish leader called Pontius Pilate seeks to please the leaders of the Temple and retain his worldly power status by similarly consenting to Jesus' crucifixion, despite his knowledge of Jesus' innocence. Jesus is murdered because powerful leaders in his own community do not like His teaching. John is beheaded because a powerful leader of his community does not agree with his teaching. Jesus, and historically all the prophets of God, endowed with divine and life-giving power, are ultimately rejected by humanity's greedy desire to hold on to a purely worldly and lifeless facsimile of authority and rule.

At the other end of the bracketing of this story of John's beheading, the apostles who were sent out two by two return, gathering around Jesus and reporting all that they have done and taught. They go to a deserted place to rest and pray, but are followed by a huge crowd. Jesus' compassion for the crowd of five thousand culminates in yet another type of feeding. There is spiritual food in His teaching, and material food to sustain the bodies of those who follow. It is Jesus' demonstration of God's way of empowering others to continue the work of the Lord Jesus in a hungry world. As we saw last week in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, God is gracious in empowering those who come in faith and humility, with no desire for personal aggrandizement.

The character portrayals in Mark are also fascinating and bracketed here as well. As a woman, it is particularly interesting for me to see the strong female characters in Mark's Gospel. Man or woman I hope you agree this is also fascinating. Before this passage, we heard about the profound faith of the bleeding woman and Jesus' power to heal her of her disease. In Mark chapter 7 we will hear about the persistent faith of the Syrophenician woman who comes to Jesus begging for healing for her daughter, and will not take "no" for an answer. Their own power comes from faith in God and Christ Jesus. Between their stories there are another two women: the vengeful and evil Herodias, and her licentious daughter Salome. Later, before the feast of the Passover and Jesus' death, there is a woman at Bethany who anoints Him, despite the protests and disapproval of some of Jesus' male disciples. Then at the cross, it is a group of many women, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joses and another Salome who stand vigil risking their own lives in their steadfast love and faithfulness to the Lord, after all the other disciples have fled in fear.

What a terrible and stark contrast between secular power and the power of God. The former, so frequently misused for the fleeting comfort and security of one vested with earthly power, and the latter exemplified in Jesus as power that is shared, power that heals, power that gives life, and power that ultimately saves. Oh what sorrow and what power. Frederic Huntington describes it like this, "Sorrow is our John the Baptist, clad in grim garments, with rough arms, a son of the wilderness, baptizing us with bitter tears, preaching repentance; and behind him comes the gracious, affectionate, healing Lord, speaking peace and joy to the soul." Herod could not grasp the Godly sorrow of his tragic choices that would have led him to fall before the throne of God and repent of his sins. Pilate too, rejected the Son of God in favor of reinforcing his own temporal position of authority. You and I already know that humility is the key that unlocks the door to God's powerful presence for good in our lives and in the world. If we learn to bookend our own lives fully in humble prayer, then the Holy Spirit will guide us in all truth, including those areas of our lives where we are being called to Godly sorrow and repentance. As we continue to pray, our gracious Lord will bless us abundantly, we will be healed, we will re-discover God's perfect joy, and we will know the peace that passes all understanding in this life and the next.

Amen.