

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
July 12, 2009 B

Proper 10
Mark 6:14–29

I find the story of Herod's birthday party and the details surrounding the dance of his step daughter Herodias, ending with the severed head of John the Baptist brought in on a platter at the end of the banquet as disgusting a story as it was when I first heard it. Why in the world would Mark put this story in his gospel at all? It's the question I asked myself when I first realized it was the appointed gospel for today. And I decided I didn't want to touch it with a ten-foot pole.

But then last Tuesday evening came – and I was faced with a conflict. I was asked by the Rev. Wanda Neeley of First Presbyterian to take part in an ecumenical service at St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic Church with the participants in this year's Ulster Project. When I realized, however, that a 'Stop the Violence' Walk was going to take place at the same time, I called Wanda to let her know I felt a need to join the ECU community in the walk on Fifth Street and attend the memorial service for Landon Blackley and Drew Kirby, the two men senselessly killed in a recent drive-by shooting. Wanda didn't know it was happening but quickly said, "I wish we could take the Ulster Project participants and come join in the walk."

There was no 'Stop the Violence' Walk after the news broke throughout the community of John's disciples that he had literally lost his head while imprisoned. Mark tells us that 'when his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.' And Herod probably lived the rest of his life with some degree of regret for having offered to give his step daughter whatever she wanted, as a gift for the dance she performed. Mark's account tells us that 'the king was deeply grieved' but he gave Herodias his word and, besides, he didn't want to lose face in front of his guests. So he did as she requested. We all put our foot in our mouths from time to time but Herod had no idea that his wife would use the occasion of his birthday and her daughter's dancing, to manipulate him into ordering the end of John the Baptist in such a violent and grotesque manner. Herodias was probably drunk when

he offered his step daughter anything she wanted. I bet when he woke up the next morning that he wished he had never done what he did the night before.

John the Baptist had told king Herod, in no uncertain terms, that it was wrong for him to break up his brother Philip's marriage in order to marry his sister-in-law, Herodias, which he did. Herod certainly didn't appreciate John's message but seemed to have had some respect for him as a prophet whose message reached many people. Herodias, on the other hand, harbored a grudge. John was killed to satisfy a wealthy queen's insatiable hunger for revenge.

Mark places this story just after the sending out of the twelve disciples on a mission to announce the good news of the kingdom of God. It seems to serve as a sober reminder of the cost of discipleship. There's a cost to do ministry – and I'm not talking here about the financial resources needed to balance the budget. I'm talking about the cost of discipleship and some of the implications of following the non-violent path of Jesus. "Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate," Jesus teaches in Luke's Sermon on the Plain. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Pardon, and you shall be pardoned. Give and it shall be given to you...For the measure you measure with will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:36-38).

Do we see the world through the vision and mission of Jesus, and act accordingly, especially in our world today which needs more than ever the non-violent yet potent gift of the love of God in Christ? To bring this question down to earth, Can we love our enemies? Can we pray for those who persecute and oppress and even kill others? Can we, for instance, show the same compassion for James Earl Richardson, the man arrested for gunning down the two men on Fifth Street, as we might extend to the families of the deceased? This isn't a rhetorical question for me but one I pondered in the presence of the families of Landon Blackley and Drew Kirby during their memorial service last Tuesday evening. For it's not just about bringing someone to justice. The gospel of Jesus calls us to compassion and mercy. These are tough but pertinent questions we need to ponder and act on as disciples of Jesus. For the cost of discipleship isn't easy. It includes loving those who may not seem worthy of our love, or of our compassion, mercy and

forgiveness. But it includes a God whose arms as wide in accepting all God's people as Jesus' arms on the cross at Calvary.

Jesus rejects a culture of violence characterized by a tit-for-tat mentality. He proposes a strategy for breaking the cycle of evil, but most of us are too busy to slow down long enough to even examine some of its roots. And when we do, the weeds are endless and the stones so big that the culture of violence in our world today seems like an impossible task to face. Confronting the sources of violence in our culture requires the courage of looking more carefully within our own hearts, our own thoughts, and the patterns of our own lives. It was a grudge that Herodias held on to, that led her to seek revenge in such an extremely violent way against John the Baptist. Anger, jealousy, harboring grudges, seeking revenge – all of these, to name just but a few, are toxic to our health and to the health of our neighbors. It's the stuff which, more often than not, when mixed with alcohol or other drugs – and easy access to guns, can lead in extreme situations to the kind of violence all too common in our present culture.

Many people keep hurt and pain tucked away deep inside themselves – and as we know, our hurts and pains, like our opinions and judgments of others, can often imprison us whether we want to acknowledge that or not. But when we are able to let go of our pain and hurt and opinions, we can become open to the forgiving, reconciling, healing love of God in Christ. I suspect it's why, in part, we are here this morning: to be nourished and strengthened by God's Word and at the table where all are welcome. We seek forgiveness and healing so we in turn can offer to others what so graciously is given to us.

We are in the midst of the yearly Ulster Project experience here in Greenville, an ecumenical venture born of the violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The project started in 1975 by a Church of Ireland (Anglican) priest in an effort to help ease the tension in a highly charged, segregated and often dangerous situation where violence was commonly used as a political tool by both Catholics and Protestant extremists. The Ulster Project is a good example of how to creatively transform a culture of violence into new possibilities, establishing global relationships of friendship and trust whereby one can see more clearly exactly what Jesus means when he call us to love one

another as he loves us. KIDS4PEACE is another example. It's a year long cultural exchange sponsored by the Episcopal Dioceses of Atlanta and Jerusalem, in which children from the United States and the Middle East share their stories, hopes and dreams and discover their common heritage. Both the Ulster Project and KIDS4PEACE help us to imagine a world in which children and teens as future leaders are taking steps toward global understanding and peace.

A Japanese master named Nan-in received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overflowing," he said to the Japanese master. "No more will go in." "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

It's not easy, as disciples of Jesus, to put into practice the non-violent teachings of Jesus. Our cups are too full. It takes a willingness to risk some of our selves for the sake of the gospel. It takes an openness to being vulnerable to others. It takes an empty cup.

We who are disciples of Jesus are, at best, wounded healers. And, like the wounds of our Risen Lord, our wounds can become the very gift God uses as a source of healing for others in surprise-filled and unexpected ways. I've discovered that grace can be found in the most unlikely of places, if our cups aren't full.

Amen.

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