

8th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
July 15, 2018

Text: Mark 6:14-29

Theme: A Passion Narrative

In preparation for today I read all of the lessons and I went back and forth (back and forth) on which text to preach on before I decided to make the gospel reading the focus of my sermon. It turned out to be a crazy idea on my part because it certainly is a challenging story to dissect and even more difficult to interpret. On this beautiful summer day who wants to hear about the gruesome way that John died? At the later service Stella will be baptized. Is this the story that we want her family and friends to remember on her baptism? And aside from all of that it does not seem to fit very well with what comes before or with what follows but perhaps that was part of the intrigue for me.

On the surface the story is filled with all the suspenseful ingredients that fill our television screens these days: sexual lust and seduction, political ambition, scandal and murder. Herod is trying to manage some very complicated relationships within his own household and because of his political position. He discovers how difficult it is to please everyone and still uphold his integrity. He is at odds with his wife over John the Baptist and he is at odds with John the Baptist over his wife. His relationship with John elicits mixed emotions. On the one hand he is described as fearful and perplexed. On the other hand he is quick to protect John. He is caught in a web of relationships that ultimately renders him defenseless.

But it was John who paid the deadly price when Herod chose to honor the request of his daughter to have him killed. And the request of the daughter came about because her mother held a grudge against John. The author of Mark tells us how bold John was to speak the truth of the gospel to Herod who had unlawfully married his brother's wife. His wife did not like what she heard and she set her mind to kill him on the spot. But she did not have the means to execute her plans immediately so she held her anger in and waited for the opportune time to have her wish come true.

When we take away the actually beheading of John, we definitely can relate to all the rest of the story on a much smaller scale: complicated relationships, our desire to please everyone, and/or being at odds with family members. And it was verse 19 that I kept going back to in my studies. It is the verse that read: Herodias had a *grudge* against John and wanted to kill him. The word *grudge* is not used frequently in the Bible but when it is it used the results are not good at all.

A Living Parable – Two neighboring families argued over the placement of an elderberry bush. Over the next fourteen years their dispute led to many court appearances with accusations ranging from mere trespassing to all-out physical assaults. At one point the one family had a twelve-foot fence built along the property line to separate the two households. This did not stop the cross-border hostilities so they installed security cameras in trees which the husband monitored from a command center in his home. Glass windows were boarded over and motion sensors were installed.

The one neighbor attacked the fence with a chainsaw.

In retaliation the other planted weeds in their garden.

They flooded each other's yards.

Anonymous prank phone calls were made.

They blasted music late at night to keep the others awake.

And (by the way) they lived in a duplex.

Unfortunately it is a true story. Anger over the placement of an elderberry bush led to two families holding a grudge for over fourteen years. And I could share with you all morning even more stories of people who have been hurt or wronged by others and there has been no attempt towards reconciliation. How many of us know people who have not talked to each other for years if not for decades? It may not have led to a physical death but it does take an emotional toll on us. It gets complicated.

Holding onto our grudges takes up so much of our energy and wastes so much of our time. It nags at us and it sits in the back of our minds constantly. And the results are always the same. Holding onto our grudges leads to painful separations and serious retaliations. It affects not only the people who are feuding but it affects the whole family and co-workers and friends. And once underway it is so very difficult to stop and only increases in intensity as the years roll by.

Once more in Scripture we see a glimpse of how human nature leads us into sin – sometimes into deadly sins. But keeping in mind the whole story we move from this one verse and see how masterfully the author of Mark uses this account of John’s death as a foreshadowing of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Like John, Jesus had to face those who held a grudge against him because they disapproved of his teachings and they denounced his self-proclamation that he was the Son of God. We find in both stories national leaders who looked favorably on their captives and who would have preferred to spare the lives of the innocent. However, both cared more about pleasing the masses than exercising justice. Against their better judgment they each condemned to death their nemesis. In both stories the bodies are recovered by the disciples and placed in a tomb. In Mark 6 the passion narrative of John mirrors in Mark 15 the passion narrative of Jesus.

What a dramatic story! It is almost unbelievable except we have seen over the past couple of years how people who hold onto their grudges have led themselves to do some deadly acts of violence. But it is not the way of Jesus Christ. Mark is telling us today that the death of John is not the whole story.

Jesus comes quickly into the story to show us that there is something beyond the heartache and tragedy of our broken relationships. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus comes to make possible for us the unimaginable ... to repair the irreparable and to forgive the unforgivable. Jesus comes so that there can be a better ending to our stories.

When our marriage is over or we have just lost our job or we fear our child will never speak to us again or we are pretty sure our friend has betrayed us or we think we may have just messed up the one relationship that meant something to us then the possibility of another ending (a good ending) is not just good news but it is the best news we can imagine.

But especially today (on this nice warm summer day when we baptize Stella) we remember that the stench of death that covers this passage is the prelude to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because we are Easter people these dark moments can be turned into grace moments. It is a grace that does not gloss over pain or downplay the horrors of evil. It is grace alone that redeems this narrative.

Our lives are filled with choices. We can choose to hold onto our grudges and remain angry and distant from those who have wronged us ... or we can ask God for the grace to show grace. Amen