

## **“So, you think you can . . . Gyrate?”**

Salado UMC—15 July 2018: Eighth after Pentecost

Preaching Text: Mark 6:14-29—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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**“It is difficult to produce a television documentary that is both incisive and probing when every twelve minutes one is interrupted by twelve dancing rabbits singing about toilet paper”**

**—(Rod Serling—1924—1975).**

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Several years ago, I served a church in which a young woman came to me with a genuine concern. She told me that she had decided to keep her children from worship. When I ask why, she said, “I think too much of the Bible is violent and I want to keep my children away from such things.” I told her that certainly the Bible had its share of violent parts. Yet, understanding how to address violence is part of what Christian disciples learn. Then I asked if she allowed her children to watch Saturday morning cartoons. She said she did. I suggest that she watch with them some Saturday morning and tell me what she thought. Later, she admitted that cartoons were violent. After discussing her concerns with her husband, they decided on another course of action. These parents decided to try to put all such violence in the context of faith. This I believe was a wise course of action. We cannot hide from violence, but we can learn ways to avoid meeting violence with more violence. Hear our lesson about the violent death of John the Baptizer:

**14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” 15 But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”**

**17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias [some authorities read: “the daughter of Herodias herself” Salome?] came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” 23 And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”**

**24 She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king**

**sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb (Mark 6:14-29 NRSV).**

We ask “why do we have a Bible story so violent?” It is a fair question, so let's briefly look at it. Bible readers need to remember something when putting a question to the Bible. There is the immense time interval between today and the biblical events. For example, occasionally someone asks about “animal rights” as we conceive these rights today. Modern people address this issue with regard to sacrifices (for one of many examples, see: Leviticus 3:1). Yet people in Bible times would scarcely have understood the question. Many of these themes the Bible discerns from the perspective of its time, such as slavery or women's rights. What we can remember about the Bible is that it is extremely realistic in its understanding of the life it portrays. Any questions about violence and scripture must take into account the days depicted by the biblical writers. Biblical culture merely reflects the violence of the culture from which it came. Ironically, more than one social commentator has observed that the twentieth century was the most violent in humankind's history. No up-to-date evidence suggests that the twenty-first century will be any less coldblooded. Even so, when scripture portrays violence, lust, or bearing false witness, there is an uncanny timelessness to these issues. We struggle against these same sorts of human failings every day—even now.

Douglas John Hall suggested that: “The real theme of this pericope (text), however, is not the drama of life and death, love and hate, that so easily captivates our imaginations; it is the confrontation of political power and prophetic faith.” In other words, we see Herod's dilemma as being a choice between doing the right thing and protecting his pride. He could default on his preposterous promise and spare John's life but also face ridicule. Or . . . he could save face in front of his family and guests at the royal birthday party and do what he did—whack John the Baptizer's head right off.

We can note here that political expediency and pride go hand in hand. As we will see later, Mark's Gospel prepares readers for the passions of Jesus and his disciples (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; 10:45; 13:1-15:47—Robert A. Bryant). Of course, we call the antidote to pride—humility. Another antidote we might call service above self. Jesus taught again and again that both humility and service were the true marks of discipleship. We Christians do not have the market cornered on truth, but we can unflinchingly do the truth.

Matthew 25 supports this point of view in spades. If you read that text with care, you realize neither the sheep nor the goats—the righteous or the unrighteous—realize that their deeds toward the poor, hungry, and oppressed is what distinguishes those who enter the Kingdom of God from those who do not. Nobody knows. I do not know who penned this little ditty but it packs a punch:

**I dreamt that death came the other night, and heaven's gate swung wide.**

**An angel with halo bright ushered me inside.**

**And there to my astonishment stood folks**

**That I'd judged and labeled as quite unfit, of little worth, and spiritually disabled.**

**Indignant words rose to my lips, but never were set free. For every face showed stunned surprise.**

**No one expected me.**

Reinhold Niebuhr, both professor and minister, started his ministry in Detroit Michigan a bit before the infamous Ford Motor strike in the 1930s. Many workers were out of work, hungry, and homeless. Niebuhr wrote about his despair that the Christian churches in Detroit did nothing about this. They just seemed to ignore the suffering that was going on all about them. But, Niebuhr said, other people, non-Christians in that city, were the ones who offered aid and help, even to the point of sacrifice. Niebuhr wrote: “From what I can see, there are two Christians in Detroit, and they are both Jewish.”

The only test for Christians being Christians, are humility and service. Which means, Christians are not those who claim to have the truth. Christians are the ones who do the truth. One other note about Sabbath observance . . . .

In the December 1941 issue of *Time* magazine, a story appears that author Bill Bryson would later call a “Ray Buduick story.” Buduick decided to take his private plane up for a Sunday morning spin as he often did. Unluckily for him, this was on 7 December 1941—and did I mention that Buduick lived near Honolulu. Early that morning the Japanese Air Force launched an aerial assault on the United States. As Bryson wrote it:

As he headed out over Pearl Harbor, Buduick was taken aback, to say the least, to find the western skies dark with Japanese Zeroes, all bearing down on him . . . . Miraculously he managed to land his plane safely in the midst of the greatest airborne attack yet seen in history, and lived to tell the tale, and in so doing became the first American to engage the Japanese in combat, however inadvertently”  
(Bill Bryson, *Made In America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, Black Swan Press, 1994).

For this reason, I recommend worship to those venturing out on Sunday mornings. You just never know. Amen.

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