

Title: Truth to Power

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you set aside people to speak on your behalf, calling us to social justice and fidelity; be with us always and occasionally give us the courage to speak out in love, bringing the world to you and to Christ Jesus through whom we pray. Amen.

Remember when the What Would Jesus Do bracelets were popular? They just went by WWJD. It was like a secret code. The purpose, as I understand it, was a statement of ethics. In other words, our actions should be what Jesus would do in our circumstances, as if we can read Jesus' mind.

My hunch is that very few of the people who wore those bracelets ate regularly with the poor and outcasts. I mean, that's what Jesus did. I also suspect that very few of those people criticized the powerful and called out hypocrites. I mean, that's what Jesus did.

I know that no one had WWJBD bracelets. What Would John the Baptist Do? Very few people would sign up for wearing a hair shirt and live on a diet of locusts and wild honey, not to mention bathing other people. Very few people would tell the Jerusalem leaders that they are a brood of vipers. Very few people would tell their ruler that he is incestuous and is an adulterer. John the Baptist did.

There are those who believe that church people should stay out of politics. That may have a source in the first amendment. It may also be the sad history of the church having an incestuous relationship with the state. The state supported the church and the church supported the state. This was for the sake of power. The rich Judeo-Christian tradition of confronting the state became lost. The tradition of prophecy was lost.

When people called on the government to reunite the families that the government separated, which caused people to call the demonstrators communists or worse, I wonder when politics became more important than family, when politics became more important than love.

Today is about prophets and what happens to prophets. The popular term of prophecy today is one of soothsaying or foretelling, but that is not biblical prophecy.

Prophets are pains in the tuchus. It is part of the job description. When Jesus said a prophet is not welcome in his hometown and family, he was making an observation about the loneliness of prophets and why the people Nazareth and his family rejected him.

We have two examples today. God called Amos to go from the kingdom of Judah to the Israelite shrine in Bethel and prophesy. Amos told them that they do not take care of the poor and that they need to stop worshipping the Canaanite gods.

After Solomon's kingdom was split in two upon his death, the king of Israel, Jeroboam I, made two idols that look like bulls and placed one in Bethel and one in Dan. Jeroboam did this so that his people would not go to Jerusalem to worship. A few centuries later, Jeroboam II is king when Amos is called by God.

Amos sees a vision of God holding a plumb line. Only God is not using the plumb line to see if a wall is square. God is applying the plumb line to Israel. Somehow, I have an echo of a voice from long ago, maybe my mother's voice, in my head that, at one time, said "Straighten up!" God set a plumb line to Israel and said, "Straighten up! Amos, go tell them to straighten up."

The priest at Bethel, Amaziah, was also the royal tattletale. Amaziah told Jeroboam Amos' words and they were less than kind against the king. Amos also says that Israel will go into exile as a punishment for their sins. Amaziah told Amos to go home and prophesy there. Amos denied being a prophet. Amos is just herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees. Amos is only there because God told him to go.

It seems that Amos did return to Judah and since he could not safely prophesy in Israel, he would write down what is to be said to Israel. And so, Amos became the first of the prophets to write down their prophecies. Isaiah likely read Amos as Isaiah copies parts of Amos in Isaiah's writings. Amos' life was safer by writing than confronting.

John the Baptist was regarded by the people and by Jesus as a prophet. John called for a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. This was not a new thing. What was new was that John was not part of the temple clergy.

This is where Herod Antipas enters the scene. Herod was the son of Herod the Great who rebuilt the Jerusalem temple, among other buildings. Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born and died soon after. After Herod's death, the Roman Emperor Augustus divided Herod's kingdom among Herod's surviving three sons and a daughter. Herod had more children however, if Herod suspected a family member of conspiring against him, he would have them killed.

Herod Archelaus who ruled Judea was fired by Augustus nine years later and Augustus imposed direct Roman rule. Herod Antipas ruled the Galilee area. Herod Philip ruled north and east of the Jordan and Salome had the south coast, modern Gaza. Antipas built Tiberius and named it after the emperor.

Antipas divorced his first wife, the daughter of the king of Nabataea, and married his half-brother, Philip's wife, Herodias. It is said that Herodias divorced her husband. All of this took place in Rome. John had two problems with this marriage. One, it was incestuous as Herodias was Antipas' niece. The second was that, according to Jewish law, Herodias was still married to Philip. Antipas feared that John's popularity might form a revolt and had John imprisoned.

Herodias was also not pleased with John and when she had the opportunity, she had John executed. By criticizing the marriage, John was implying that Herodias was a woman of ill repute. She took it personally. In spite of Antipas' reluctance to execute John, Herodias was able to manipulate her daughter and Antipas into causing John's death.

Prophets speak truth to power. There are often consequences for doing that. In Amos' case, he returned home rather than face arrest and possible execution. In John's case, he was executed. Prophets are mainly, but not exclusively, concerned with social justice. The word translated as prophet in Hebrew is *navi*, which literally means spokesperson. A prophet speaks for God.

Now Jesus' deeds have gotten back to Antipas. Rumors were that John the Baptist was raised from the dead and that's why Jesus had all these extra powers. Some said he was Elijah. After all, Jesus' deeds of power were reminiscent of Elijah's deeds of power. Others said Jesus was like a prophet of old, maybe like Amos.

But when Antipas heard about Jesus, he was convinced that John was raised from the dead. It sounds like Antipas had feelings of remorse and guilt. Antipas had John beheaded only to save face.

Powerful people tend to reject change, especially when the change is to be personal to them. It could be because of ego or saving face or an image of self-importance. And powerful people can inflict significant consequences on opponents, even prophets who speak to truth to power.

Someone might be called by God and someone might speak truth just because that one cares. If we speak the truth in love, we do so out of care and concern for another person. The hope is that the person will hear what is said in a spirit of love. But that is not always the case.

When speaking the truth in love, it good to remember the following: be specific, remember the golden rule, don't be unrealistic, offer solutions, consider the timing, address the problem, not the person, consider the consequences, and build bridges. We read in Proverbs, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy." (Proverbs 27:6)

Prophets didn't follow these rules, which made their vocation very dangerous. Jesus did end up being poorly treated. In spite of his crucifixion, love did not die on the cross. Instead, love was made manifest on the cross – Jesus' love for us. Let us reflect Jesus' love even to the powerful so that Jesus' kingdom will arrive on earth.

Text: **Mark 6:14–29 and Amos 7:7–15** (NRSV)

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus'^c name had become known. Some were^d saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at

^c Gk *his*#

^d Other ancient authorities read *He was*

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^e 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;^f 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^g 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^h 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. ¹

^e Gk *he*

^f Other ancient authorities read *he did many things*

^g Other ancient authorities read *the daughter of Herodias herself*

^h Gk *his*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 6:14–29). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.