

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Alex Aivars

July 15, 2018

The events described in our text for today is not for the faint of heart. I mean, let's be honest, it's a little gruesome, actually. It might seem more like a tale from a Stephen King novel than from the Bible. It raises a lot of questions for me. Why did Herod like to listen to John? What was the dance Herodias danced, that could sway her step-father so? Why did Herod follow through on his step-daughter's request? How exactly was John's head presented to Herod? Was there decorative lettuce and a tomato cherry next to John's head?

I'm very curious about John the Baptist as well. I wonder if John knew he was being led to get his head chopped off? And if he did, what was he thinking? Was he regretting being so openly outspoken about Herod's marriage? Or was he resolute in his thinking? Was he proud of himself that he stuck to what he believed, even though it would mean death?

Whatever the answers to these questions, John the Baptist spoke truth to power. John did not think it was right what Herod had done by marrying the wife of his brother. We don't know the back-story to how Herod ended up marrying his brother's wife, but I would have to think it probably wasn't altogether wholesome and

would include some plot twists. I'm not thinking Herod's brother would have been happy about his brother Herod marrying his wife. But Herod was a powerful man. He could marry whoever he wanted. He could behead anyone he wanted. And no one could say anything about it. Well, no one except for John. And John had his own power. At the beginning of Mark we are told that John the Baptist had a big draw, drawing "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" to be baptized. He was able to attract people to himself. This is a type of power. Based on the way John dressed, he may also have been a part of a religious order. Although John did not have the same type of power that Herod had, he had power nonetheless.

John ended up paying the ultimate price for speaking truth to power. John was steadfast in his condemnation of this marriage of Herod and his brother's wife. It does not appear that John took back his words after he was imprisoned. And then it cost John his life (and head).

It can take guts to stand up for what you believe in.

In 1985, Nelson Mandela was in prison. By this point he had been imprisoned for 21 years, part of a life sentence for conspiring to overthrow the South African government and their institutionalized racial segregation in the form of apartheid. But then, in 1985, Mandela was offered a deal to be released from his South African prison. But there was a catch: Mandela must renounce his values and beliefs and give

up the fight to end apartheid. It was an offer that would have allowed him to see his wife and children. And to live free. But, he proudly refused.

“I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom. I owe it to their widows, to their orphans, to their mothers, and to their fathers who have grieved and wept for them.”

Mandela did not give up on his beliefs and values.

Martin Luther, the founder of our Lutheran faith, also had strong convictions that cost him almost everything. It's often said that Martin Luther was a reluctant leader. He did not start out wanting to form a whole new branch of Christianity when he posted his 95 theses. He started out only wanting to reform the Catholic church. He sincerely held his beliefs, and would not budge. When his reforms were not happening, or slow in coming, it became clearer and clearer that a new branch of Christianity needed to be founded. And so Luther reluctantly became the leader of this new branch of Christianity. He suffered because of this, at one point spending a lengthy amount of time stuck in a castle where he could not leave. But even through all of this, he never wavered in his beliefs.

Standing up for our beliefs does not have to mean big, life altering gestures.

I'm a big fan of contemporary Christian music and there's this new song out called "Dream small." Here's one part of the song that resonates with what I'm talking about. Some of the lyrics from the song:

Dream small

Don't buy the lie you've gotta do it all

Just let Jesus use you where you are

One day at a time

Live well

Loving God and others as yourself

Find little ways where only you can help

...

A tiny rock can make a giant fall

Dream small

We currently live in a country where it doesn't cost much to be a Christian. Christianity is still the majority religion. We do not face persecution here (although some Christians would say they are being persecuted). We can worship freely and openly without fear of backlash. We are pretty comfortable, by many standards. It may not ever cost us here in the United States much to be a Christian.

But I would argue that we will all, at some points in our life, need to stand up for our beliefs and values. When we do this, our actions may not be written in history books with the likes of Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther. Maybe they will. But our actions are important nonetheless. It can be every day acts of kindness. It can be letting someone in ahead of you on the highway. It can be letting someone ahead of you at your favorite coffeeshop. It could be a kind word to your co-worker.

People of Wicker Park Lutheran Church, following Jesus will cost us something. It cost John the Baptist his life. It could cost us a variety of things, from our time, to our money, and even perhaps our life.

But my question to all of you is, when you feel compelled to speak truth to power and stand up for what you believe in... what will you do?