

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B  
July 12, 2009  
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

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## “A Parent’s Responsibility”

Text: Matthew 18: 21-35, Romans 14:1-12, Exodus 14:19-31

Last Sunday Fr. Brett preached that a prophet is without honor among his family and neighbors. And he made the good suggestion that we strive to honor those who love us, even when they speak painful truth to us.

This week we see what happens when a prophet is killed because of a simple grudge. What do we do with that? I was a bit daunted by the soap opera I read in our gospel reading today. What can we possibly draw from this lesson? Don't behead prophets of God? Of course there is more to it than that, and when you look more deeply at the story, you will see that we are actually more sympathetic to Herod than you would initially think.

I am not saying we should pity Herod. He is the antagonist in the story, and for good reason. But the Bible is not just made up of Holy Men, and Holy Women. There are many regular folks, people just like you and me who allow all of their flaws to do them in, and this is one of their stories.

So let's look at *As Jerusalem Turns*, or maybe it's *General Palace*. This soap opera really happened. What we have here are three main characters, I want us to look more closely at two of them.

Let's begin with the flash back in the story describing what led to John the Baptist's demise. Herod here is not a King, he is a tetrarch, who is a sort of ethnic figurehead over a group of the Jews, a puppet and servant of the Roman Empire. He was constantly faced with men of more power and means than he wielded. One of these men, with tremendous influence over the people, but no political power, was John the Baptist. And like Caesar, and the others who had more influence than he, Herod feared John, for the special place he had with God, and more importantly the sway he had over the people.

He knew his wife (who was also his brother's wife) wanted John killed, because John had spoken the truth about Herod's illicit relationship with Herodias. But Herod was afraid of John and would not have him killed, for fear of what the people would do. Herod wasn't a

particularly spiritual or religious man, the scripture says John's words confused him, but something about John made Herod want to listen to him. When Herod is having his birthday party, with many important guests in attendance, his daughter dances for them, and Herod is impressed by the dance. He probably heard about ancient kings promising people half of their kingdoms when pleased. And he wants to seem important like one of those kings of old, so in front of his friends, he makes a boastful offer, "whatever you ask me, I will give you."

That was the tipping point for Herod, but it wasn't the end of his decision making. Herod's daughter was suddenly given power she didn't know how to handle. She had been made a big offer, and she probably wasn't even aware that her dad had made a boast that he couldn't even back up, when he offered her up to half of his kingdom. So this young girl, besides John, probably the only one in the story we can truly feel sorry for, goes quickly and asks her mother, someone she trusts, "What should I ask for?"

How often do parents hope that their children will come to them when confronted with a big decision, that they will seek our advice, when their choices seem too big to handle? But are we ready for them to do that?

Clearly Herodias was not ready for this, that is, she was not ready to love her daughter and think first of her daughter's best interests. Herodias had been shamed by John the Baptist, for the improper relationship she was in with Herod, and what a terrible emotion shame is! Shame often makes us do anything, even horrible, unthinkable things, to stop from feeling ashamed. So Herodias, faced with the choice of helping her daughter, or getting rid of the source of her shame, chooses the later, and manipulates her daughter to get what she wants.

Maybe you don't think something like this could happen, but it happens everyday, in many regular families. A mother manipulates her children in order to win in a divorce settlement. A father convinces his son to engage in a dishonest business practice because no one will suspect the son of wrong-doing. It is so easy to manipulate our children for our own desires, but that is exactly what we promise not to do when we baptize them.

Here is an interesting connection for us, John the Baptist is killed, because a mother manipulates her daughter to seek her own revenge.

Today when we baptize little Matthew, and every time we baptize a baby, the parents vow by their "prayers and witness, help the child to grow into the full stature of Christ." We vow to put their best interests first, and as a congregation, to do all in our power to sup-

port them in their life in Christ. When we are confronted with the opportunity as Herodias was, to advise our children, pray for the mercy and grace in that hour, to choose their best interests over our own.

But the story doesn't end with Herodias' daughter seeking advice of her mother. She then returns to Herod, and asks for something she can hardly understand. Herod is faced with a dreadful choice. He has made his vow in front of all his acquaintances, at his own birthday party, no less. And till now he has protected John the Baptist, from his wife's cruel intentions. But his daughter presents her request.

What does he do? He caves in to peer pressure, he holds his reputation more important than the life of another. The scripture says he was deeply grieved, he knew what was right and wrong. He had enjoyed hearing John the Baptist for good reason, he was probably close to hearing the true word of God. But because of trying to please his guests, and because he needed to save face, he sacrificed another for his own sake.

While we may not ever be in the position, to have power over the life of another human being, we very well may find ourselves given the option, to save our own reputation at the expense of another person. Especially when our word is on the line, or when people are watching. This decision point is the second dreadful moment, Herod shows the true smallness of his position, the inadequacy of his character, by choosing to grant the request, rather than simply say, "no, that would be too much."

John the Baptist was killed, partly because whenever we say to someone or something, who is not God "whatever you wish, I will grant it." it will cost us too much. John the Baptist was killed, because a mother traded her parental responsibility to lead her child in a good way, for the escape of her personal shame. And John the Baptist was killed, because a man was unwilling to sacrifice his pride, or his reputation, for the sake of a man's life.

This soap opera, has much to tell us. When you are presented with the opportunity, to do the right thing, even when you have made a mistake, and will suffer for the truth, accept suffering, rather than condemnation.

When your children or grandchildren, or others who trust you, come to you seeking your honest advice, pray for mercy and grace in that hour, that you will say what will truly benefit them, and leave your own interests behind.

And remember, unless it is God you are talking to, never say, "whatever you wish, I will grant it." For any one but God will demand more than you should give.