

## Sunday, July 11 2021: Sermon given by Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

### Bad and Good Theology

Mark 6:14-29

What a ghastly story! A preacher losing his head over a dancing girl doesn't appeal to reason, especially if you are a preacher. The story is a marvelous piece of fiction created by Mark, but that doesn't make it less truthful or less terrifying. "Mark's account is best seen as his own creation, allowing him to emphasize certain parallels between the fate of John and Jesus, especially how both were put to death at the insistence of others by a reluctant and almost guiltless civil authority – Herod and Pilate."<sup>[i]</sup> Mark tells story right after the disciples are sent out two by two into a world dominated by Herod and thus they are not unprepared. The purpose of the fictive story is to tell theological truth.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Herod executed John because he could. All Herod needed to kill a preacher was an excuse. Yet no matter how much power Herod appears to have, in the larger world ruled by God, Herod becomes irrelevant, a cipher, a bit player in a drama much larger and more powerful than Herod. The center of history is not Herod, ruler of Galilee, but Jesus, king of the world. Herod could execute a preacher on a whim, in a drunken, lust-filled orgy over the beauty and seductive power of his daughter, but he could neither co-opt, resist, or defeat the power of God. No matter how attracted we may be to political power, there's always the nagging insecurity, fear, shame, and guilt that cripples the power, that unmasks the power, that shows up the power's soft underbelly of weakness. Pick any king from any time or place. Sooner or later, all kings "shut their mouths" before the servant of the Lord. Did not Isaiah tell us so long ago: "So he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate" (Isaiah 52:15).

The tragedies of royal power pile up like a train wreck between Albany and Grand Central Station: "And the king did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The refrain sounds like that irritating drum beat that comes from the left field bleachers of the Cleveland Indians: Incessant. Irritating. Do you remember when Tetzl was selling indulgences for the Church just prior to the Reformation? He went from town to town beating on his drum to draw a crowd. He also had the equivalent of a modern advertising jingle – one of those catchy phrases that grate on the mind like "Get your wet teddy bears, 100% wet teddy bears" in that insurance ad on television. Tetzl said over and over: "As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven

springs.” Luther, reportedly said, “I’ll beat a hole in his drum.” I hope he said that: it’s one of my favorite Luther sayings.

Mark’s story may look and sound like ordinary politics, a biblical version of House of Cards, but it’s theology. Theos is God; logos is words: words about God. The story of Herod is theological.

Let’s start with a bad theologian. His name is Herod. Bad theology can lead to terrible decisions and disturbing ways of living. Herod hears about Jesus and theology enters the door. After all, Jesus is the Word, the Son of God: Theos plus logos. Jesus doesn’t even have to be present to create a disruption. Word of mouth. Palace gossip. “Did you hear?” Sometimes a bit of gossip floats into our consciousness that is so juicy that it just begs to be spread. It comes to dominate the entire scene. In fact, the gossip becomes so powerful that it creates one conversation. Everyone is talking about it. The gossip creates powerful emotions in people. Sometimes gossip creates anger: “I’m going to kill the guy,” erupts from the mouth even before the gossip is known to be false. Sometimes gossip creates fear and insecurity. Sometimes gossip increases interest. Herod had heard of Jesus. Even when Jesus is the subject of gossip, there’s power in the name. Before there was a written gospel, there was gossip. People were all talking about Jesus. Stories were spreading about Jesus. Flip through the pages of the gospels and you will pick up the early forms of gossip about Jesus. “I heard he was a glutton and a friend of sinners.” “Last week, a guy was in my shop, and he told me that this Jesus fellow was the devil himself.” “I think Jesus is one of the prophets.” “No, I heard he was Elijah.” “I heard he talked to Samaritan women.” Herod heard about Jesus.

What usually escapes our notice is how much life is determined by affects or emotions. Rather than carefully considered, rationally-deduced, intelligent decisions, political power brokers and people making up theological truth claims often operate in the realm of pathos – what I’m calling affect. Emotions spill out of the story like Legos.

1. Herod, mixing insecurity, fear, and shame thinks John has been raised from the dead.
2. Herodias had a grudge against John.
3. The dance of his daughter greatly pleased Herod leading the king to offer her half his kingdom.
4. She asked, per her mother’s instructions, for the head of John on a platter.
5. The king was deeply grieved.

Herod and his wife are a tangle of emotions. Herod and Herodias are not making rational political judgments; they act out of a maze of tortured emotions. In other words, they act out the way we act out.<sup>[iii]</sup> Herod says, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'" Herod was superstitious and scared, consumed with anxiety, haunted by his shame. Herod, the one with all the power, is also the most insecure man in the room. Isn't it strange how arrogant, pushy, powerful people can be so afraid? It's almost a broken record to watch rich and powerful men masking insecurity by throwing around money, abusing women, acting like proud peacocks on dress parade. Pathos, pathetic! Why do powerful people often have such insecurities, jealousies, and feelings of paranoia?

One basic emotion dominates the scene: Shame. "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." No amount of royal power has soothed the tortured mind of the king. He killed an innocent man and the culprit had been bad theology powered by bad emotions. Look around and see how many people are living their lives and making decisions on the same kind of affective scale as Herod and making a mess of it all even while thinking they are in charge and have it all together.

Herod's words smack of shame. Silvan S. Tomkins argues that shame and guilt share a common currency, "the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation."<sup>[iv]</sup> Shame, for Tomkins, conditions and positions all other emotional states. "Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears," he writes, "yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man."<sup>[v]</sup> Shame is the dominant negative affect of everyday life. Just as each of us longs for pleasure and reasonable amounts of joy, shame—no matter how disguised—becomes our constant companion. Herod is unable to escape his shame.

We can see Mark crafting the drama as he takes his readers back in time to show what triggered the old shame in Herod's heart. Like those criminals who show up at the scene when the cops and crowd gather, Herod stands once again before the scene of his own awfulness. Herod, who was attracted to John's truth-telling message, had locked in jail "for the sake of his wife Herodias." The house of Herod became a house of shame. He never recovered from John's judgment that he should not have stolen his brother's wife. He never recovered from his murder of John the Baptist. All the strip-tease dances in the world would never erase the image of John's head on a platter. Herod is a quivering mess of fear and shame. John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him.

An opportunity came for Herodias to get her revenge. Herod is deeply moved by the dancing of his daughter. Herod probably whispered to his chief of staff, "If she weren't my daughter, I'd be dating her." Or maybe he said, "Yeah, she's really something, and

what a beauty, that one. If I weren't happily married and, ya know, her father...." The dancing daughter "took his breath away" like Solomon once did to Queen Sheba. "Well, "there was no more sense in Herod" before the dancing daughter. He offered the girl whatever she asks. Her mother tells her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod, trapped in a gumbo of intrigue, face-saving, and wife-pleasing, was sickened by the trap he had fallen into but he's a politician and just like that, an order given is a preacher's head on a platter and the girl gave it to her mother. "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her."

There's a better theology on the table than the superstition, shame, and revenge of Herod and company. Let's go back to hearing about Jesus. Jesus offers us good theology. I believe that the purpose of Jesus is peace and praise and that our purpose is to make this a peaceful place of rousing praise. I am not assuming that I know exactly what peace is. Peace is not a retreat from involvement in the nitty gritty issues of the world. Peace is not easy or free of conflict. I think Mark inserts this story in this place because it comes right after the disciples are told they are being sent into the world as peace-bearing witnesses. Jesus wants us to know we are carrying the peace message into a world where putting a preacher's head on a platter is just taking care of business. "Christians are sent out into the world armed with nothing more than a conviction that we have been given a word of truth so exceedingly strange that we nailed it to the cross." At least now we know what we are facing. The peace of Christ, is, as one theologian puts it, "a precarious peace." [\[vi\]](#)

Think of the church as the weather maker of culture. We create the weather with showers of blessing and the sunshine of peace or we create disaster and storms. I like to think of the weather as 58 in the morning topping out at 70 degrees with an afternoon shower and lots of sunshine.

If the church can realize that we are the ones to make the weather, we will act differently. Haim Ginott, in his classic book, *Between Parent and Child*, says, **I HAVE COME TO A FRIGHTENING CONCLUSION THAT I AM THE DECISIVE ELEMENT IN THE HOME. IT IS MY PERSONAL APPROACH THAT CREATES THE CLIMATE, MY DAILY MOOD THAT MAKES THE WEATHER.**

Jesus intends for the church to create the climate in the world, the mood, the attitude, the spirit of the culture. And that means we are to be the peaceable community. Be at peace with one another. Reconciliation not revenge. Love not hatred. Peace not anger and violence and road rage. Again, notice that the theology is still about emotions but instead of the negative meta-emotion of shame, there is the mega-emotion of unconditional forgiveness. There is the ultimate sense that we are in the hands of a

loving and compassionate God. In this confidence, we can go into the world of Herod, where the fate of preachers is up for grabs, and speak the name of Jesus.

Let there be no confusion here. To speak the name of Jesus is to bear witness in a world of insecurity, fear, violence, and anger. When Stephen was martyred for speaking the name of Jesus, Luke forges the verbal link between “witnessing” and becoming a “martyr.” In Acts 22 Paul says, “While the blood of your witness Stephen was shed.” I want you to know the danger you face in Herod’s world. When you witness to the risen Christ and the reality of his trial, suffering, and death, you are also being thrust back in time to reenact the pattern of the suffering Christ, to suffer for his name, to be put on trial, to face the possibility of death, and to proclaim his resurrection. It doesn’t get any more theological or more difficult than that. “We have been given the happy task of making his name known” [\[vii\]](#)

Such a peace means that we will surrender all claims to privilege, status, and power. Willingly we become servants, slaves, ambassadors, helpers of others. We offer hospitality to the world. After all, hospitality means making a space where God will feel welcome. The peace of Jesus "is a peace that is based on the truth that requires that we be hospitable to the ultimate stranger of our existence: God."

Nothing is more frightening to us than living without being in control. To give up power is to become vulnerable. To let go of privilege is to give unto others what we have. I am convinced that the trauma of America right now is our fear of losing what we have, of no longer being in charge. Our fear doesn't produce peace; it produces violence.

Here's a capsule picture of where we stand today. I watched a video of a man trying to run down his neighbor. He was driving a tractor with a front loader and screaming profanities as his neighbor is running for his life. Neighbor? Violence? How odd that this is the direction our secular world is taking us. Sure it sounds like an extreme example, but it's just one of so many.

The peace of Christ is the most important gift we have to offer to the world. The peace of Christ occurs when the church refuses to violate the dignity of others. It is so much more than words but please hear them again:

Pastor: "The peace of Christ be with you."

People: "And also with you."

That's it. We can live in the house of Herod – fear, guilt, and insecurity or we can live in the house of Jesus – peace and joy. It's your choice.

[i] John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. Crossan develops the interesting theory of why Herod needed to be rid of John. Perhaps all Herod's act the same. When an earlier Herod learned about Jesus, he was frightened. When he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem. If you have seen one Herod in action, you have seen them all, no matter the name, the game of power always plays out the same. Back in the day when Herod went by the name of Pharaoh, the king gave the order, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

What John was forming was a giant system of sanctified individuals, a huge web of apocalyptic expectations, a network of ticking time bombs all over the Jewish homeland" (Crossan). This is why Herod struck at John and John alone. John represented a peasant-based movement centered on wilderness and Jordan, Moses and Joshua, and was a direct threat to the power of Rome.

[ii] Probably Mark is recalling an earlier and well-known Mediterranean horror story. After all, the story exists in other histories as a well-known example of how not to exercise power. Lucius Flaminius was a powerful consul of Roman in 184 B.C.E., and he was in love with a notorious woman. At a dinner party he was boasting of how many people he had in chains awaiting beheading. The woman said she was anxious to behold a man being beheaded. Flaminius ordered one of the convicted men to be brought to him and he cut off his head with his sword. The deed was savage and cruel: in the midst of drinking and feasting – a human victim sacrificed at the table as a spectacle for a shameless harlot.

[iii] Affect theory is a field of conversations emerging from queer theory, poststructuralism, feminism, and antiracist theory. Following a loose typology developed by thinkers like Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Mel Chen, Elspeth Probyn, and Donovan Shaefer, affect theory can be divided into two branches.<sup>14</sup> In the one stream, thinkers inspired by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, like Patricia Ticineto Clough, Erin Manning, and Brian Massumi, identify affect as a radically precognitive, preconscious, and nonconceptual force that shapes subjectivity upstream of self-awareness.

[iv] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 133.

[v] *Ibid*, 133.

[vi] Chris Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*.

[vii] Hauerwas, *Working with Words*, 83.