

Speaking Truth to Power - It's Risky Business

The Beheading of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29 Amos 7:7-15
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Do you like stories filled with high drama, scheming characters, lust for power, lust in general, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder with gory details? Well if you do, then today's Gospel reading from Mark 6 is a real doozy! (Those who think the Bible is boring have never read it very closely.)

The story of the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod, and having John's head served to him on a platter, has provided endless inspiration to painters, authors and playwrights, composers of operas, movie makers, and dancers of what has come to be known as the 'dance of seven veils'. And here's one of the most interesting things about it. Unlike any other story in the entire New Testament, it is also recorded *outside* the Bible itself by a secular historian of the time, named Josephus.

Josephus records that John was killed for political reasons – undoubtable true.. The gospel of Mark says it was motivated by John the Baptist's criticism of Herod's marriage to Herodias, in recognition of a violation of the Jewish law in Leviticus not to take a (living) brother's wife (Lev. 20:21). As we saw from the bulletin insert outlining the complex genealogy of Herod the Great's family line, Herodias was the wife of Herod Philip, half-brother of Herod Antipas (the Herod of this story) before he stole her away. [Notably, Herodias was also Herod Antipas' niece, the daughter of another half-brother, Aristobulus. And you think there's drama and dysfunction in your family tree!]

As to why this story is included as an assigned lectionary text, I think it's because of its unique message concerning the consequences of being prophetic – the risks of speaking truth to power. Therefore, in relation to discipleship and ministry, **those with prophetic voices who speak out against injustices in the status quo should not be surprised when political and religious power structures try to silence them.**

Let's back up just a bit and reflect upon what it means to be a prophet, or to have a prophetic voice and message. From a biblical perspective, prophets are messengers sent by God not to predict the future, as many believe, but rather to speak a word of warning to those in power. They warn of the ensuing consequences if those in power continue on their present course of action of not following the righteous and just ways of God. So, as a note of correction, **prophets in the Bible were sent by God to proclaim the truth, not to predict the future.**

And as we know, **those in positions of authority don't like truth-tellers telling the truth about them, especially in public.** That's true even in countries that value free speech, like the United States. For we continue to witness those with power and

authority resort to tactics and strategies that try to defame or discredit or even silence truth-tellers so that others won't believe them. Our latest example of this is to claim **that any unflattering or critical news that is spoken or printed about those in power is "Fake". Yet, that which is perceived by some as simply being partisan, and there can be validity in that, can nevertheless be true, not fake.** The common practice of 'shooting the messenger' has often been the go-to response by those in power – whether in politics, business, or religion. Thanks, however, to recent movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too, **truth telling is having its positive effects of challenging the engrained wrongs in the status quo and bringing about real change.** We, as a people, are increasing our ability, and perhaps courage, to listen to and believe the truth tellers and whistle blowers.

But let's back us again and explore what it really means to speak truth to power. If the Rev. Dr. Harold Hill, Marilyn's father, was still with us (and in my sermon preparation and teaching, he still is), he would insist on defining what we mean, especially about the word 'truth'. Let me give you an example of why that is so important.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, admonishes that we are to **speak the truth in love** so that we can build up the body of Christ, the Church, in love (Ephesians 4:15-16). On more than one occasion, while during debates on the floor of presbytery meetings, I have heard one particular pastor begin his words with, "I speak the truth in love..." That was usually followed by a call to adhere to traditional Presbyterian heritage, i.e. the status quo, which, among other issues, would deny anyone in the LGBTQ community in an open relationship to be ordained in our denomination or to get married. **In my personal and professional opinion, that was neither the truth, nor loving. Yet, as I spoke the opposite truth in love, I'm sure he felt the same way.** This is a very good lesson and reminder for all of us that **perhaps what any of us consider to be 'truth' may indeed simply be our own personal beliefs and deeply held convictions.**

So, how do we discern the difference between speaking truth and speaking beliefs and convictions? For that, I want to turn to the wisdom of Walter Brueggemann, one of the most prolific and influential Bible scholars in recent history, especially of the Old Testament. His book *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, was published in 2013. In a 2014 interview with the Religion News Service, Brueggemann was asked about the biblical nature of power and how we should relate to it. He responded:

Legitimate power always includes attentiveness to justice. When power is not attentive to justice it cannot endure. This is a summons to us to **keep the agenda of justice for the vulnerable alive and front and center to maintain a kind of subversive stance toward power.**

Brueggemann was then asked, "Describe the relationship between truth and power as we find them in the Bible." His response is deeply helpful in understanding the biblical nature of truth. He said:

Truth is not a set of propositions in the Bible, but a cluster of relationships. Those are relationships of dignity, well-being, security, and respect. When power violates those, then what those who administer such power learn is that they

cannot finally withstand the force of truth. So, the truthfulness of God's commitment to neighborliness does not give in in the long run.

Biblical truth, then, is not what we consider just the right things to believe, but rather concerns right relationships and how we treat others. When these relationships become distorted and harmful, and when others are not treated equally with respect and dignity, then this is the truth that needs to be spoken to those in power. **Speaking truth to power, therefore, can be expressed by resistance: resistance to unfairness, resistance to inequality, resistance to injustice.**

Brueggemann goes on to offer a warning about the dangers when Christianity gets in bed with power.

It is very seductive for all of us. And I suppose it has been the seduction of the Jesus movement since Constantine, when Christians gained access to power and have loved having it. **I think the collusion of the church with political order in almost any society causes the church to lose its edge and have failure of nerve about the gospel that has been entrusted to it.**

But here's the twist – there's always a twist. **We like to cast ourselves into the role of being prophetic**, the underdog railing against the status quo and courageously speaking truth to power, regardless of the consequences. Yet, Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asks us to also **find ourselves on the side of those loyal to the status quo, power, and privilege**. In that case, she asks of us some difficult questions.

- Who are we desperate to silence or wish would keep silent?
- How are we complicit in the denigration of the just and holy by not speaking up?
- How have we acted to save face rather than act with integrity?
- What actions haunt us and what do we need to do about that unease?
- What is our relationship, as Jesus' disciples, to those with worldly power?

The gospels never promise us that the journey of prophetic discipleship will be smooth and free of controversy. For by the time we get to the end of today's biblical text we realize that there is no happy ending to this particular story. Similarly, Mark uses it to foreshadow what will happen to Jesus when he speaks truth to power.

Ultimately, then, this is a story about the misuse and abuse of power, and the structures of injustice it displays when silencing the prophetic cry for justice. Yet, that did not stop John the Baptist. It did not stop Jesus. It did not stop his disciples. Nor should it stop us, even though there are still a lot of Herods out there.

College Hill must, as we continue to discern our calling, to give voice to the call for peace and justice for all persons. So, even when facing the risks involved, we must speak truth to power.

Amen.