

# It's Risky Business to Speak Truth to Power

## The Beheading of John the Baptist

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
July 11, 2021

For anyone who thinks the Bible is just plain boring, there are certain stories to which I like to point. That includes basically everything in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. But in the New Testament, there's rarely a story with quite as much intrigue as the one concerning the beheading of John the Baptist, as told by the gospel writer, Mark. Did you notice the cast of characters? An adulterous political ruler, a scheming wife, a dancing seductress, scandalous palace drama, and a gory beheading, with its presentation on a platter.

This story 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 recorded in the entire New Testament, this account is also recorded *outside* the Bible itself by a secular first-century Jewish historian named Josephus. Josephus records that John was killed for political reasons – undoubtable true. By the way, it is in his account where we learn the dancer's name, Salome. That name is not found in the biblical account. The gospel of Mark says John the Baptist's death was motivated by his criticism of Herod's marriage to Herodias, in recognition of the violation of a Jewish law in Leviticus not to take a (living) brother's wife for one's own (Lev. 20:21).

Here's another by the way. This particular Herod (and there are many in this family tree) is Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons who is the ruler over the region of Galilee. Herodias was his step-brother's, Herod Philip, wife. She also happens to be both Herod Philip *and* Herod Antipas' half-niece. Yes, you need a flow chart for this dysfunctional family.

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 having a prophetic voice – the risks of speaking truth to power. Therefore, in relation to our own 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 criticize or 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 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. This is the role Amos plays in today's Old Testament reading concerning measuring Israel with a "plumb line". **Biblical prophets, therefore, were sent by God to proclaim the truth in the present, not to predict the future, a common misunderstanding. They were truth-tellers, not fortune-tellers.** And as we know, those in positions of authority don't like truth-tellers telling the truth about them, especially in public. Today, we also call some of them whistle blowers.

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. **For over four years now, in which we have actually witnessed an attack on free speech, any unflattering or critical news that is spoken or printed about those in power has and continues to be proclaimed as "Fake news"**. You may have noticed how many other world leaders now use this phrase to attack any negative press about their words or actions. Yet, that which is perceived by some as simply being a partisan attack (and there is 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 yes, religion.** Thanks, however, to recent movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too, and over the past four decades in the Presbyterian Church (USA) the More Light movement seeking equality for LGBTQ persons of faith, truth telling is having its positive effects of challenging the engrained wrongs in the status quo and bringing about real change.

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, and former religion professor at the University of Tulsa, 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). In the experience of many, however, including myself, especially during debates on the floor of a presbytery meeting, **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, a Presbyterian and 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 (RNS), 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.** Much of my own ministry over the years can be described, in part, as one of resistance. Much of the ministry of College Hill over the decades can be described, in part, as one of resistance.

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.

Have we not witnessed this time and again, especially since the rise of the Moral Majority in the early 1980s and continuing with many who curried favor with the former president. **The Christianity practiced by many turned toward a grab for political power and authority, not the spreading of the good news to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus.**

But here's the twist – there's always a twist. We like to cast ourselves, especially as progressives, 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, now the former editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asks us in her commentary on this biblical passage 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 Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, 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 – just a severed head served on a platter. 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, those who may wish to silence our ministry efforts. Hopefully, of course, not ending up with the same fate as John the Baptist.

As we continually work to discern our mission and ministry here at College Hill, **we must continue to give voice to the call for peace, justice, and equity for all persons.** Many within our presbytery, our city, and beyond, look to College Hill to be among those prophetic voices speaking truth to power, even when risks are involved. Let's keep the courage and persistence needed to stay involved.

Amen.