

Mark 6:14-29

The Gospel of Mark, at this point, is showing quite clearly that Jesus' ministry and the coming of the Kingdom of God will be resisted. We heard how Jesus was rejected in his hometown last week, how the twelve, sent out, had to shake a little dust off their sandals when they were rejected. But so far, it's been some family drama and a little dust. What's the big deal?

Well, tell that to John the Baptizer. Thrown in prison for preaching about biblical marriage. "Oh that bible was written a long time ago, people are much more liberated and accepting of non-traditional relationships now." O really? You want to tell that to John? Seems like the people were so open to non-traditional relationships that when you told them that was against God's law, it got you thrown in prison!

Even worse, it gets you killed.

And as for non-traditional, get this: Herodias was Herod the Great's Granddaughter, and her first husband Philip, and her new husband Herod Antipas: Were both Herod's sons. That's right, she married her uncles.

And John speaks against it. Herod, I'm sure, didn't love that, but he kind of likes John, he knows there's something about him... But his new wife... no, she hates John.

There is a quote attributed to Luther, though I haven't found the source, that says, "Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you."

Whether Luther said that or not, John the Baptist is up for that task. He called the pharisees a "brood of vipers," and here he is again making people angry with his preaching. And, just like

last week, we can sit here and criticize him, we can say, “If John would have been more tolerant, or more relevant, or built up that relationship more, then he may have had more opportunity to win Herod and his, ahem, “wife” over! And think of all the good for the kingdom that would have done! But he was too firm, too bold, too unwelcoming.”

And once more we wage a war between faithfulness and tact. Because yes, we *are* called to speak the truth *in love*. This is not a license to be a jerk. I think we’ve seen about enough of hatred and division in our lives and on our screens. Let’s not celebrate the hate, but (back to our text) realize that even if you try your best to speak in love... there will still be rejection. Ask John.

And if you think John didn’t preach lovingly enough, at least consider how Jesus views him and his ministry: Matthew 11:11a “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” Yes, Jesus, the King of kings, doesn’t seem to be reprimanding John’s firm preaching too much.

And yet it is resisted. This shouldn’t terribly surprise us. The reality is that no one wants to hear they are wrong. We come here and when the preacher and the bible picks on sins you don’t particularly struggle with, you say, “that’s right Pastor, tell those sinners what’s what!” But then it comes to your pet sin and suddenly it’s, “well, I don’t see why you have to bring that up so much.” And we squirm a little, “And well it’s different for me.” “Or, I know it’s a sin but I’m working on it.” And that one is at least getting closer to home isn’t it? It’s getting closer to why we preach that law, because as we preach the law it’s an invitation for us to change, to be conformed to God’s Word and truth, which we know is for our good.

Yes. We preach that law not just to say “we are better than you!” (which we aren’t, by the way). Not just to make you feel bad. But because God wants something better for you! God loves you as you are, *but he loves you too much to leave you as you are*. He will work on you – and sometimes that hurts.

So instead of rolling your eyes, instead of dodging, let’s hear God’s Word and let it draw us closer, closer to a confession, and closer to Him, who will strengthen you to fight against sin. Because that is the proper response to hearing the law: confess it, and repent. And see what God will do.

But that doesn’t change the fact that our natural response is: we don’t like to hear we are wrong, and it sure isn’t fun to hear it. And so we fight against it. We dodge, we self-justify, we compromise. All the same things Herod did. When he didn’t like the message, “easy, take the messenger away so you don’t have to hear it.” That helps some, but it doesn’t help that nagging conscience that knows what you are doing is wrong. So you have to self-justify, and whip that conscience into submission. “I can do what I want! I am king here, not John that silly preacher! I like it, I deserve it!” And when that’s not enough, and you’re angry and you need someone to take it out on, why not the Church? Why not John? And so he get’s his head chopped off because of a spiteful “wife.”

But does that “fix” their problem? Does that make right and wrong change – killing the messenger? No, it doesn’t, because, that’s right folks: we are talking about God’s law. Herod and Herodias’ problem was not actually with John, it was with God and his word. They killed the messenger, they didn’t kill the Judge, nor did they change the law of the omnipotent King of kings. They were still guilty.

Now, coincidentally, or rather, in the ultimate plan of God, Herod gets a chance to meet the Judge. Pilate, wanting to “pass the buck” sends Jesus to Herod. And here is Herod, ironically, sitting in judgment over Jesus, the true Judge of eternity. And how does Herod treat this encounter? Like a circus. That’s right, the One who will Judge him into eternity is standing right in front of him and he wants parlor tricks from him - of which Jesus gives him none. If Herod had any inkling who that was in front of him that day, he would be off his throne, casting his crown, and begging for mercy and aid to amend his sinful life.

But instead, in lowly humility, John, and then Jesus, are killed. Because they are “bad people,” they tell us things we don’t like. Never thinking for a second it is we who are bad and they who bring us truth from God.

John is decapitated, we see that in our text, quite graphically. Decapitation is a sign of total victory and dominance. You can parade their head around, put it on a platter, put it on a stake, fling it in a trebuchet. And what are they going to do about it? Nothing! Because they are dead and you aren’t! Total, complete, domination. Total, complete, victory.

“Here’s John’s head, mother. Look at it all gross, all macabre, all ghastly! The fool.”

But John belonged to Jesus, John pointed to Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And Jesus said John, not king Herod, was the greatest in his kingdom. Which means: do you think John got an inheritance? Do you think he gets to set aside his Nazarite vows and celebrate in the victory feast? You better believe it!

Why should we believe it? Because his Judge, his King, his Savior and ours, that same Jesus was given to death. Helpless on a cross. The victory of the romans and the chief priests so secure, secured with nails, so complete...

And yet, not at all. He rose again, and the guards fainted as dead men. Which means they weren't victorious at all, but completely powerless. Completely! Don't you see how Jesus has now undone basically the worst thing they can do to us - Killing us? That's one of their greatest weapons, and now, thanks to our Lord: Nope, doesn't work!

And so we get to say "sorry" to Herod and Herodias. Your victory is not so complete after all. John will rise, healed and whole and he will stand in the judgment because he has a Savior who he himself, again, preached is "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," a Savior who John baptized to fulfill all righteousness. A righteousness Jesus will give to him to stand in the judgment day.

And that same righteousness he gives to you. So you can let the law hit you, let it hurt you, and find the sacrificial and resurrection Gospel to heal you whole. Even through death.

And we might think, "Well I'm no John the Baptist, I've compromised, I've fallen short, I've broken my vows, I've lusted like Herod..." True, true. But I should finish that verse, from Matthew 11: 11 "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Which means: does Jesus' resurrection victory have room for the broken? The sinful? The doubter? For you? Yes, it does. You, in the eyes of the world, can be a complete loser, but in Christ, you will win the greatest victory of all.

And one day, when he calls us home, and ultimately on the last day, that victory will be complete. So complete, in fact, that everyone will know it.

Until that day, In a world of loss and victory, rejection and rejoicing, death and life, cling to the one who wins life eternal. In His name, Amen.