

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: July 11, 2021

“Who holds the Power?”

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Good Morning, everyone. I hope you all have plans to stay cool for the rest of the day. Speaking of heat, what does everyone think about today's readings. In both Old and New Testament readings we have some scorned women and, particularly in our Gospel, some manipulated men. Just FYI, I know a few preachers who chose different readings, as this graphic display of evil is a tough subject.

As I am sure most of you may find yourself doing, as I read this Gospel of John the Baptist's head being served on a platter, in my mind's eye I see several films, especially Cecil B. DeMille's. I picture the incense wafting over a large meal served on a low table with men lounging around. I can almost smell the combination of spices and sweat, of wine and fresh bread.

I imagine the men laughing and the usual base responses as a young girl twirls herself in front of them. I picture the young girl as innocent even though I know she is old enough to understand what she is asking for.

I picture Herod, a little tipsy and overwhelmed with lust, just on the verge of being embarrassing, when we have Herodias finally getting what she has wanted for some time. To be rid of the wild man who, with crowds around him, asks her to repent from her ways.

So there are a few things that need to be looked into a little deeper. If we start with the women in the Gospel and even reflect on the Old Testament woman, we see

that they wield power in an indirect fashion. Almost cat-like they have to use other people, circumstances and be patient to wait for just the right moment of weakness to assert their power and get what they want. And, if you were to ask them, these women would admit they have learned the system. They can get what they want, and at times allow those who are being used to actually feel good about what they have been coerced into doing.

The men on the other hand, will use their power directly. They will order something done and without question, it will be done. The men in the story, in fact most of the male characters within scripture, have a name and position mentioned, so it is actually rare that we get the name of Herodias and Salome in print.

The reason I bring up this almost imbalance of power, (and I say “almost” since the end result for either party seems to be getting their needs met) is that I want to direct you to who is actually holding the power for these characters that seem to be as unrighteous as one gets.

Who is holding the power? Read again. It is their egos holding the power. It is their fear of what people will think and say that is holding the real power. They themselves have actually lost control. So much so that it is almost a social norm for this to happen.

When thinking about who really killed John the Baptist, it will indeed be Herod who gets the credit and the blame. Herod represents the Temple, the Jewish oligarchy; but most of all, he represents the power of the Old Reign. For those reading this after the resurrection of Jesus, they will see blame go generally to the Jews of that time. Similarly, Pilot, not heeding warnings from the female in his life, will ultimately have Jesus crucified - not because he really desired it, as Herod did

not desire to kill John the Baptist, but because Pilot's ego could not deal with the idea that he would be disliked for his actions and may upset the governing status quo.

And again, when it comes to Jesus, who gets the blame for his condemnation? It is the crowd: considered to be Jews coming to celebrate Passover; those who cried "crucify him" in front of Pilot, those representing the Old Temple traditions, so to speak. We will never really know for sure.

It seems powerful women and powerful men who give in to their egos become a story told for centuries. It seems that the reputations they desired to save did not supersede them in the way they probably would have wished.

So what does this story really tell us? What it seems to tell me, as I know and understand the Gospel as a declaration of God's love, is that evil exists, and the ego closes the heart to the goodness of God, no matter who you are or what your status in life. The choice becomes infamy or eternal peace. Whether you are a woman or a man, or even a youngster, this scripture tells us to look at who is wielding power. Is it your ego, or is it God?

What if Herod did not give in? Would God have opened up other opportunities for him? Maybe he would die in prison like Paul, but would have his faith intact. We will never know. What if Pilot listened to his wife and allowed Jesus to be free. What would have happened to Pilot? We will never know.

What if the crowd, rather than being swayed by what was popular, intervened? The men at the table laughing but refusing to see a head on a platter. The crowd in front of Pilot staring or turning away and going home. We will never know.

Is the ultimate holder of power, God? Did God allow the evil in for a reason? Is this story to show us the lengths that we can fall away from God's grace? If God is God, and evil exists, we have to ask the question, does God direct evil to create a greater good? Or did God know when the evil would slip in, and therefore used it for our salvation?

I would love to be able to answer all these questions, but no offense, they are above my pay grade. I too swim in theories, but have no facts; intuition, but not material proof. I have faith. But the question we can all answer is "what or who is holding our power?" Are we letting our ego get the best of us? Are we going along with the crowd? Are we afraid of not fitting in, or suffering the consequences of being different? Are we opening ourselves up to let evil in? The answer to those questions should be that God is in charge. But that means I might not get everything I want or desire. It might mean that I am subject to evil and to death, just as John and Jesus were. But that is the "what if" I am willing to bet on.

The choices made here in today's scripture did not turn out to be of good consequence. I choose the way of love, not the crowd, the way of compassion not judgment, the way of right actions understanding the cost on my own self. I choose discipleship. I choose to check my ego at the door and try to hear God's voice.

Can I do this always? Probably not. Can you? Maybe about the same. But it is the intention that counts. It is why the phrase, "I will with God's help" rings true. Next time you need to make an important decision, maybe stop and ask, who has the power here, ego, or God? **Amen**