

7-11-2021 7th Sunday of Pentecost

We begin our worship this day in the name of God, Abba, Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray.

For all in need, we ask your compassion, O God. For all who are merging into the fullness of your grace, we asked continued blessings. For all who are alone, and feel themselves surrounded only by darkness, that your light permeate and penetrate their hearts and lives that, together with us, they too may be rising in your infinite light and glory. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Elizabeth Hunter-Ashley sings and leads the congregation in Psalm 24 by Kevin Keil. Gary Sponholtz accompanies on the piano.]

The Gospel for today is from **Mark, chapter 6**. [Mark 6: 14-29]

About this time, King Herod who had sent to have John the Baptist arrested, and had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. It was at this time that John had told Herod, 'It is against the law for you to have your brother's wife.' As for Herodias, she was furious with John, and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to do so because King Herod was in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and righteous man, and so he gave John his protection. When he had heard John speak, however, Herod was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to John.

An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers, and for the leading figures in Galilee. When the daughter of this same Herodias came in and danced, she delighted Herod and his guests, so the king said to the girl, 'Ask me anything you like and I will give it to you. And he swore her an oath, 'I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' The girl at once rushed back to the king and made her request, 'I want you to give me John the Baptist's head on a platter.' The King was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn in front of the guests, he was reluctant to break his word. So the king sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John's head. The man went off, beheaded John in the prison, and brought the head on a dish and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and took John's body, and laid it in a tomb.

The Word of God.

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In the name of God, Abba, Imma, Son and Holy Spirit.

I'd like to begin with a first portion of W. B. Yeats' poem, "*The Second Coming*". He wrote this a century ago, in 1920.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Too descriptive of our current world, isn't it? 'Things falling apart. The center cannot hold.... The best lack all conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity.'

The Bible calls that latter part 'a hardened heart', when my righteousness is more important than your existence. Obviously, there is no flexibility in a hardened heart. It is cholesterol packed: it can't move, it can't breathe. It is only about adamant commitment. And those who would consider options are considered weak. They are considered enemies.

Today, I will speak about a hardened heart--also called sacred violence--when my extermination of others is considered god-pleasing because I believe it is god-pleasing. Hardened hearts function with two components. The first is a corruption of the knowledge of truth and self-awareness, corrupting our communal attempt to discern, 'What is true?' by simply saying, *'I have the truth, and you either believe me or you don't.* And, of course, that destroys self-awareness. This leads to a process which is the grand reversal. Inside of this topsy-turvy corruption, murderers claim to be victims, and victims are charged as murderers.

Racism, of course, is the classic example in our day now, where people claim that people of color are taking away our way of life. They're destroying us and our children and our future. Anti-vaxxers join in this kind of grand reversal. No appeal to truth. No research. *'Just my opinions.'*

There are other examples, but what so often holds folks and these views together is rage, just rage. Have you heard any people who have gotten vaccinated raging about the glory of getting a vaccine? Appreciation, sure, but raging? Never. Everything gets twisted around. We hear that inside of King Herod himself. He loved to listen to John the Baptist; he hated to listen to John the Baptist. He didn't know what he wanted.

This, too, is part of that envy, which I had mentioned last week, which leaves one so confused that they are willing to kill to please others. This is, of course, in violation of the Tenth Commandment, which is about envy--or the old word 'coveting'--desiring what the neighbor has, desiring to possess what another has, even desiring what the other desires, even if I don't have it or get it. It's about comparison, right? Not was own self and awareness but that desire to possess what another has--property, spouse, children, cattle, you name it. It gets very contorted living inside of those endless desires. *I'm somebody if I have that or what you possess.*

Well, the second component part of this hardened heart--first, as I mentioned, is this corruption of truth and self-awareness. The second is, it needs a conspiracy. This isn't just for our time. This is from ancient times. The conspiracy assures me that they're out to get us, and therefore I must be right. It needs unanimous cohesion so that we can discount anything that actually points to reality. *'That can't be true. And we agree, right?'* Conspiracy discredits all who question the conspiracy. *'They are liars; they're making it up; they're not one of us.'*

Well, the work of prophets is to be truth-tellers. Prophets exist to reverse all the reversals. Prophets pierce, and breakthrough conspiracies. They expose conspiracies as lies which is why the ancient message of *'Kill the messenger'* is still being practiced today. That's a solution utilized throughout history. We don't want to hear it--so, destroy the messenger.

'Sacred violence' when exposed reveals that it's empty and unreal. And the flexibility of compassion is offered to both victim and oppressor. It seems utterly impossible. However, responsible people are charged to live as neither victims nor executioners. That is the calling of our faith.

And for us, it is the cross of Christ that becomes both a revelatory exposure of how cruelly we can treat each other, especially the innocent among us, and (the cross) is simultaneously a generative catalyst creating within us a desire to embody God's

generosity. No need to hold on to the stuff of life. They have their place. But a heart that isn't free and flexible is killing us.

Hear, once again, the latter portion of Psalm 84.

*Happy are those who trust
and merge their desires in your will, O God.
They let go, they release all desires
and give up everything they know,
until they finally enter
the inmost temple of the heart,
where there is no self, no other,
no things, only you
and the communion of love.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Let us pray.

O God of infinite mercy, you who love us more than we love ourselves, our lives, our community, our world depend upon you and your compassion, which knows no end. Free us from all blockages which harden our hearts in order that we might see clearly with the eyes of Christ--who we are and who our neighbors are--that we may breathe the refreshing fragrance of your Holy Spirit, and trust that your wisdom will guide us, ground us, and lead us to that peace, which the world cannot give. We pray in Christ's name.

Amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

[John and Mary Ellen Nowel sing 'Father and Son' by Cat Stephens.]

It's not time to make a change
Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault

There's so much you have to know
Find a girl, settle down
If you want to you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy

I was once like you are now
And I know that it's not easy
To be calm when you've found
Something going on
But take your time, think a lot
Think of everything you've got
For you will still be here tomorrow
But your dreams may not

How can I try to explain?
When I do he turns away again
It's always been the same, same old story
From the moment I could talk
I was ordered to listen
Now there's a way
And I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go

It's not time to make a change
Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you have to know
Find a girl, settle down
If you want to you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy

All the times that I've cried
Keeping all the things I knew inside
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it
If they were right I'd agree
But it's them they know, not me
Now there's a way
And I know that I have to go away
I have to go