

Sermon for July 14, 2024  
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In a community that strives to love,  
I hope we can all agree that the news last night was pretty bad.

This election year has already seen violent rhetoric and language,  
And broke out into physical violence last night  
In an assassination attempt on a former president.  
Many of us are exhausted by our political situation in this country,  
exhausted by the cynicism,  
the attempts at easy answers,  
The ways that so many people on the margins  
Are leveraged for political maneuvering,  
The limited options,  
The problems that impact us all:  
Like increasing extreme weather and the rising cost of living  
And pervasive gun violence  
Stubbornly refusing to be solved by the answers of any particular politician,  
By any one political party or angle.  
And last night might lower the exhaustion and fear to a new depth.

We also know that scripture,  
Refuses to name simple answers.  
Unfortunately for each of us  
who is trying to follow Jesus -  
And contrary to what we might hear from religious leaders of all stripes -  
Scripture does not dictate the correct partisan politics  
For 21st century america.

While scripture doesn't have instructions about this year's elections,  
Or the "spiritually correct" political party,  
Our gospel has a lot to say about *power*.  
How human power moves.  
It has a lot to say  
about what God's power looks like -  
How it's different from the world's idea of power -  
and how Jesus uses the power given to him.  
And the way that Jesus is constantly aligning himself  
With those who have no power in this world.  
The ways that the lure of human power

and what is God's hope for us  
often clash.

Our gospel has a *lot* to say about power and violence.

John the Baptist has so *little* power  
That he barely features in the story about his own death!  
Herod - who isn't actually a king,  
But a proxy ruler for the Roman Empire -  
*Appears* to hold much of the power in this scenario.  
He's imprisoned John  
for calling him out on his immoral marriage.  
He puts his power on display  
by throwing his own lavish birthday party  
And making a grandiose promise to his daughter,  
Trying to amplify his position and his wealth.  
Herodias has the power of influence over her child,  
Using this power to get revenge on her enemy.  
And Herod's daughter - at least, at face value -  
Is the one to hold power over John's life  
By making this her one request.  
And Herod ultimately pronounces his death sentence.

John the Baptist  
Is a person living in complete opposition  
To the scene at court.  
The voice in the desert has intruded  
In the Kingdom of Herod,  
Marked by power plays, revenge, fear,  
And maintaining a violent status quo.  
John has intruded with the spirit  
of the growing Kingdom of God,  
Demonstrated by the message Jesus and his disciples are spreading.  
Of faithfulness, love,  
And an ever-widening circle  
That threatens to include  
And feed  
Everyone.

The powerlessness -  
at least, *political, human* powerlessness -

Of John and his preaching  
dares to confront significant political power,  
Standing in opposition to the emptiness, pride, and cruelty  
Of Herod's kingdom.

John might not have any of the world's power,  
But he does hold to what's true.  
John might not have political power,  
or the power of proximity,  
or cultural clout,  
But he is not controlled by anyone in this story.  
The imprisoned and eventually executed prophet seems utterly powerless...  
Until we contrast it with the way Herod seems utterly *controlled by* others:  
His own reputation,  
His image,  
And his inability to get out of his own way.  
In a strange way,  
he has the *least* freedom of them all-  
Freedom being a very different, ultimate kind of power.  
John belongs to God, and God alone.

At the beginning of this reading,  
We hear that Herod fears  
Jesus is John brought back to life.  
This is the worst case scenario for Herod.  
This means that Herod's power -  
The power over life and death for his subjects -  
is destroyed.  
Little does Herod know  
That this is coming later in the story,  
Regardless.

Sitting with this discomfoting, horrific story  
Forces us to pay attention.  
To pay attention to the way that the human desire for power  
can devolve into violence.  
It helps us see into and through  
The new, discomfoting, horrific scenes  
Of our own time.  
To consider the chasm  
Between the power dynamics of the Kingdom of Herod

And the power dynamics of the Kingdom of God.  
It prepares us for Jesus' path  
And our own paths as Jesus' disciples.

Flannery O'Connor was a American short story writer and novelist  
Who was very Southern and also very Catholic.  
Her work is infused with themes of salvation, evil, doubt and faith.  
And yet her stories are also filled with violence and cruelty,  
Seemingly empty of God's presence.  
Like the all-too-terrible and all-too-human interactions  
In this gospel passage.  
Flannery's stories were often met with confusion,  
Short-sighted readers claiming that her writing wasn't "Christian."  
But she insisted,  
"All my stories are about the action of grace  
on a character who is not very willing to support it,  
but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, and brutal...  
There is a moment in every story  
in which the presence of grace can be felt  
as it waits to be accepted or rejected  
even though the reader may not recognize the moment."

I'll suggest that Flannery's claim  
Applies here too.  
How many moments of grace were rejected?  
How many people could have chosen to use their power  
In the Kingdom of Herod  
To a different end?  
Think about how many different individuals' action or inaction  
were required to put John the Baptist to death.  
What if Herodias had opened her ears to John's message -  
Not just about her marriage,  
but his whole message of repentance and returning to God?  
Would she have felt something besides the desire for revenge?  
What if Herod's daughter had felt free to choose on her own?  
What if Herod had been brave enough to stick to his own convictions,  
By going back on his word?  
If any one of those people rejected this power play,  
Had used their power differently,  
the story might have changed.

There are so many ways that our culture urges us towards violence.  
What we saw last night is a dramatic example  
One symptom of a larger problem.  
Our greater American culture -  
And truly, so much of wider human culture-  
Still operates like the Kingdom of Herod.  
Where death dealing power  
Is the only currency.  
But the story of the people of God  
Shows us a different way.  
Jesus offers a new way of responding  
To the power dynamics  
And violent power struggles  
Of our world.

During the days, weeks, and months ahead  
as the dynamics of power and violence play out in our own time,  
It is important to sit with our holiest stories,  
To listen for where God is  
and where grace is at work.  
To watch closely for the power of the Spirit showing up in our world  
Amidst other kinds of power that make us smaller,  
more fearful, more violent, and farther from the truth...

To move with  
Work with  
And stand with  
that Spirit  
calling ourselves and each other back  
Into abundant life and love.  
And using our lives to share  
God's love with the world.

To share news  
That is good.