

“Dangerous Opportunities”
July 12, 2009

Psalm 24
Mark 6:14-29

I am not a big fan of cross-country airplane rides. For one thing, they often require getting out of bed at a truly ungodly hour of the morning. For another, they always require the removal of one’s shoes and the experience of several other personal indignities. (I still haven’t gotten used to the sight of a complete stranger staring at the images of everything in my carry-on luggage.) And, for some of us, those cross-country plane rides also include the challenge of fitting six-foot or taller bodies into airport seats meant for much shorter people.

Of course, I wouldn’t be taking any of those cross-country trips if they didn’t offer at least a few gifts along with their annoyances. The main gift is one that still astounds me – it doesn’t take days and days of driving to be able to visit people who live thousands of miles away. Because of those planes with small seats, I can wake up on one coast and then sit down to dinner with family on the other coast, all in the same day. This is an amazing thing. But that’s not the only treasured gift of flying across the country – another is the gift of *time* as the plane flies over state after state – time to think, to reflect, to pray ... and, blessing of all blessings, time to *read*.

And so it was that, as Chey and I traveled to Georgia to see my mom two weeks ago, the hours on a plane became the gift of time to read, to try to catch up on the magazines that had been piling up in our house. I had a chance to read about Cuba under Raul Castro. I read about churches using Facebook and Twitter. I read about the work of geographers at Kansas State University who have mapped, by county, the relative prevalence of the seven deadly sins throughout the United States. (In case you’re interested, Sonoma County ranks really high on the greed scale.) ... And I read about changes in Christian radio programming in an article that, strangely enough, pointed me back to this morning’s gruesome story from the Gospel of Mark.

This is what I read about Christian radio.¹ Over the last five to ten years, Christian stations have been promoting what they call “family-friendly,” “positive” radio, instead of more biblically-based, explicitly Christian programming. As **Sojourners** magazine reports the story, these changes have led to two developments. The first is that the audience for Christian radio has expanded rapidly, to include far greater numbers of non-Christians who are tuning in. The second development is that many Christian listeners are tuning out. One Christian blogger declared that the music had become too sappy and upbeat. “I live in a real world that’s not always positive and encouraging,” he wrote, “so Christian radio’s steady diet of sugary spirituality doesn’t promote sustaining faith.” Another dissatisfied Christian blogger complained about the “watered-down” lyrics that “throw in vague spiritual reference[s] now and then.”

Now ... I don’t know enough about Christian radio to be able to offer an informed opinion on the dispute. I don’t know if the newer radio programming is as sappy and insipid as its critics claim it is or if the older programming was more full-bodied and real.

¹ Katie Balestra, “Preaching Beyond the Choir,” **Sojourners**, July 2009, 36-38 (Vol. 38, No. 7).

But what I do know is that they are raising an important question, a question that takes me back to the Gospel of Mark and the beheading of John the Baptist.

The question that ties 21st century radio programming to this Sunday morning's reading of a 1st century story of murder is this: does the Christian story, the Christian religion – or any religion, for that matter – deal with the parts of human life that are painful, hard to look at, *ugly*? Is the Christianity that we know and seek to live, here and now in this church, honest about pain, loss, violence? Is it and are we honest about our individual and collective human failures to be just, compassionate, and courageous? Or do we try to skip over the difficult truths, as I was tempted to skip over this morning's story of Herod, Herodias, and the beheading of John the Baptist?

Well, fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective, the gospel writers, the Bible compilers, and the people who put together the three-year lectionary cycle that guides many preachers decided to include the beheading of John the Baptist in the Christian story that we tell on Sunday mornings. So, at least today, if we're looking for sappy, feel-good, "it's all sweetness and light" religion, we're going to be sorely disappointed.

There may be glimmers of light in the story of Herod and John, but there's precious little sweetness. John the Baptist has been telling Herod that his marriage to Herodias, his own brother's wife, is not lawful. Neither Herod nor his twice-married wife appreciates the critique. Herod has John arrested, but, showing perhaps that he is still open to the light of God, Herod also protects John and likes to listen to what he has to say.

Then an "opportunity" comes. Herod throws a party to celebrate his birthday. In attendance are his courtiers and officers and many Galilean leaders. His daughter dances, to the enjoyment of all in attendance. Then, to demonstrate both his extravagant generosity and his raw power, Herod promises to give his daughter anything she might ask, even if she asks for half of his kingdom. But Herod's daughter doesn't ask for any part of his kingdom. Prompted by Herodias, she asks for the head of John the Baptist, on a platter.

For a second time in the story, the light of the God seems to catch Herod's attention. He is deeply grieved by his daughter's request, but then his ego, his desire to look strong and fearsome before his guests, blinds him to that light. He orders John's execution and the presentation of John's head on a platter.

This isn't simply a vivid retelling of something that may or may not have actually happened 2000 years ago. Nor is this simply the early Christians' explanation of what happened to John and how his life and ministry were forerunners to Jesus' life and ministry. No, this is a story about us, whether we want to admit it or not, a story about the dangerous opportunities that arise in our own lives. And it's a story about the devastating consequences that can come when we are blinded by ambition, by wanting to look good, by wanting to fit in, or by some distortion of love and devotion.

You and I may not have the kind of raw power Herod had, to command officers and order the execution of a Jewish prophet. You and I may not have the kind of deadly grudges that Herodias had, to want to have the head of that prophet displayed for the banquet guests to see. You and I may not have the willingness to comply with someone else's deadly instructions, as the daughter in this story had.

But you and I do have power, we do hold grudges, and we do carry within us a willingness to go along with someone else's agenda, even when the agenda makes us uneasy. You and I – and Herod, Herodias, and their daughter – are all nothing more and nothing less than a bunch of human beings, each of us a mixed bag of courage and cowardice, compassion and cold-heartedness, wisdom and foolishness.

Each and every one of us will continue to find ourselves presented with the kind of dangerous opportunities Herod and his family faced in this morning's reading. And, just as Herod seems to have had more than one hint from God that John was righteous, holy, and in need of Herod's protection, God may give us more than one chance to see and choose the path of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Allow me to describe two possible opportunities that may come your way. Most of you live in Sonoma, and Sonoma is a town that many of its residents like to describe as paradise, the best place in the world to live. Today or tomorrow or next week, if you hear someone start to describe Sonoma in such glowing terms – even if that someone is you – you'll be in the midst of an opportunity to go with the flow of self-celebration or to be honest about a few other things. You'll have the opportunity to be honest about the 10-20 percent of children in the county who live in deep poverty, honest about the high rates of alcoholism and substance abuse, honest about how many of the children in the valley drop out of school before graduating from high school. You'll have the opportunity either to join the courtiers, the officers, and the leaders at Herod's party who didn't want to spoil the festivities as Herod agreed to execute John OR to do what no one at that party had the courage and compassion to do: to take a deep breath and say, no.

You'll have the opportunity to say, no, all is not right with the world or with Sonoma and, then you can ask, "What is the Spirit of the Living God calling each of us to do?" You'll have the opportunity to ask, what is the Spirit asking us to do, so that fewer children will go to bed hungry, fewer children will seek the oblivion of drugs and alcohol, and fewer children and adults will have such limited chances to grow and thrive as beloved creations of a loving God.

The second opportunity that may come your way in the near or not-so-near future is the opportunity to join in scapegoating someone, just as Herodias and then Herod scapegoated John the Baptist, blaming him for their own discomfort, their own shame about what they had done. Here in Sonoma, it's more likely the conservatives, the Republicans, or the fundamentalists, who get blamed for what's wrong with the world. After the passage of Proposition 8, it was also popular to blame the Mormons, the Catholics, and the evangelical Christians for the temporary end of marriage equality. But in other parts of the country, it's liberal wine-drinkers, gays and lesbians, Democrats, and feminists who're most often the scapegoats. But no matter who the target is, scapegoating is scapegoating. No matter who the target is, blaming other people for the state of the world gets us nowhere we want to be.

Even with John the Baptist dead, Herod and Herodias were the same lost, troubled people they were while he was alive. Even if *we* could rid the world of any and all people *we* would like to turn into scapegoats ... the anger, intolerance, fear, greed, and anything else we blame "them" for will still reside in our own hearts.

So at least for today, let's be honest about the beauty, love, compassion, and joy that we do experience; let's be honest about the beauty and joy that we experience in Sonoma. And let's also be honest about the hurt, the intolerance, the poverty, the

violence, and the indifference that still mar our community and our world. Let's be honest about the joy *and* the grief, the peace *and* the pain.

No matter what contemporary Christian stations are playing, we can be our own radio stations, singing of God's love and faithfulness and also singing of how far we still are from being the people of peace and compassion God calls us to be. Let's sing and tell the fullness of the truth of human life, the good, the bad, and the ugly, for God is the source of the good and is the One seeking to redeem all the hurt and brokenness.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
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