

July 11th, 2021

Year B; 7th Pentecost

Amos 7: 7-15

Psalm 85: 8-13

Mark 6:14-29

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Our Old Testament lesson from Amos speaks of a plumb line. This image from carpentry is used several times in the Old and New Testaments. A plumb line, as many of you likely know, is:

“A cord with a non-magnetic weight attached to one end. When the cord is held in such a way that the weight can dangle freely, an exact vertical can be determined. Painters and carpenters use plumb lines to keep their work straight.”

This image of a plumb line is used to speak of God’s clear message, the true and clear line of God’s message, God’s message of love as seen in the person of Jesus. God’s love embodied in Jesus reminds us of our serious commitment as Christians, the standard we took on in our baptisms, to live by God’s love, to see the image of Jesus reflected in every human being, to value and respect every human being.

This plumb line, this clear line for us to live by, can sound good in the description, and we might nod our heads in quick agreement, yes, to see Jesus in every human being. Got it. But to really live this call as Christians? It is a tremendous challenge in our world when other ways to live are so so tempting.

And in case we think our present world in 2021 is way more difficult than the time when Jesus walked this earth, our gospel lesson tells us a bloody and awful story of revenge, and the dehumanization of John the Baptist.

So let’s jump into this drama:

First, need to clarify that King Herod in this story is not the King Herod we remember from the birth story of Jesus, who was known for his own acts of cruelty and hate. This Herod is the son of King Herod, and is now the ruler of the region of Galilee, Jesus’ home region.

The story opens with Herod speculating who Jesus is, as folks are flocking to hear him preach and are asking for Jesus to heal them. Some said Jesus was a new prophet, some said he was Elijah, but Herod is convinced Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life.....Herod feels deep guilt and pain over the death of John the Baptist; Herod knows he treated John as far less than human.

Thus, the story then flashes back to how John died.

Herod has been making questionable moral decisions, including marrying his brother Phillip's wife, while she was still married to Philip. John has called Herod out on this decision, and called his marriage to Phillip's wife, Herodias, adultery.

Herodias hated John for telling the truth about her marriage. Herod agrees to have John arrested and thrown in prison for speaking against Herod. But then Herod grows interested in John, and calls John to come and talk with him. The text explains wonderfully:

“When Herod heard John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet, Herod liked to listen to John.”

Herod was drawn to John and his words, Herod sensed something deeper, and yearned to listen more and understand John's preaching about God, and how humans are called to live.

However, though Herod was drawn to John's preaching, Herod loved even more his power and his role as ruler.

The next scene is a birthday banquet in honor of Herod, a feast for “Herod's courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee”. The most powerful and the richest in the region. Today, think billionaires and politicians, all at the birthday banquet.

Herod's young daughter comes into the banquet to offer a dance in honor of her father's birthday. Herod and the guests have been indulging in fine and

rich foods, and likely in much drink. The young girl dazzles all with her dance, and Herod impulsively, and perhaps with a bit of the grandiose manner of one who has had much to drink, proclaims his thanks to the girl by saying:

“Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it!”

The girl runs to her mother, Herodias, to ask what to do, and Herodias finally sees her chance for revenge on John.

Herodias tells her young daughter to ask, not for jewels or palaces or money, but to demand the head of John the Baptist.

At these words, John is no longer a human. When he was thrown in prison, his humanity was diminished, but with his life now bandied about by the powerful, he is seen now as less than human, John is now only a pawn in this fight for power and revenge.

And Herod is trapped by his own extravagant promise. Everyone has heard the girl’s bloody wish.....all the powerful are there, Herod will look weak if he spares John, and he will look like he cannot keep his word.

So, choosing power and his image over John’s life and humanity, Herod orders John beheaded. The gruesome scene plays out with John’s head brought on a platter to the young girl, who gives it to her mother.

So where does this bloody story of John’s death leave us?

God’s plumb line is gone when we humans replace it with our thirst for power, for acceptance, for wealth.

In our own ordinary lives as Christians we are called to a very different standard than the world, than our country, than perhaps even our families, hold out for us.

I know I keep saying it, but never doubt that being a Christian, taking our faith seriously, is challenging, difficult and at times, lonely work.

We will often fall short, but how can we strive to keep God's plumb line in front of us, to follow the example of Jesus, of God's deep love for each of us, God's deep love for all human beings?

This week I heard a story that reminded me of the small and large ways we can try, and try again, to follow Jesus example and see the humanity of every person we meet.

As many of you know, Fillmore McNeal died this week. He was hanging sheet rock on Thursday, and had a stroke on Saturday and died a few days later. I spent a lot of time this week with Fillmore's two daughters, Dona and Debbie.

Fillmore would have been 90 years old in October and he had lived a full life here in the county. His daughters told me many stories of their Dad's life. Many folks dropped by the house this week to say goodbye to Fillmore and to offer support to the family, and to tell more stories about Fillmore.

With the tears at this sudden dying, there was also much laughter remembering a man who loved life and loved to laugh.

But Dona told me one story that has stuck with me.

She told me of the garage that her Dad ran for many years in Kilmarnock, located close to where Walmart now sits.

I saw old photos of the garage and of Fillmore there, and of his wonderful cars.

Then Dona told me of a woman who had come by the U-Haul office a few weeks ago and saw Fillmore's picture on the wall in the office.

The woman recognized Fillmore, and Dona said that yes, he was her father. The woman spoke of Fillmore with gratitude for his actions that she could remember way back to when she was a child.

The woman, who was black, told Dona that many years ago, when no one would offer credit to black folks in the county, Fillmore would. His offering

credit allowed the woman's family to get their car repaired, crucial still in this county for getting to work, and to shop.

During difficult times, when black folks were not seen as fully human, nor worthy of credit and trust, Fillmore offered that precious help to folks in need.

Dona went on to say that she could remember that her Dad also allowed barter for pay for repairs and towing services. She remembered a whole truck load of tomatoes brought to them as payment for a repair. And she remembered ALL the stewed tomatoes she and Debbie and their mother made that summer!

In all of our everyday lives we have choices to make too, just as Fillmore had to when he had to decide whether to offer credit to folks routinely denied this privilege, routinely denied their full worth as God's children too.

God's plumb line for us is very challenging, God's message of love as seen in the person of Jesus. God's love embodied in Jesus reminds us of our serious commitment as Christians, the standard we took on our baptisms, to live by God's love, to see the image of Jesus reflected in every human being, every human being.

We will all fall short, but are willing still to try, if we are serious about being Christians, will we keep God's plumb line close by as we make decisions every day? We will fall short but are we willing to try?

Amen.