

Worship Resources - Conflicted - <https://youtu.be/jG-ebUiS3AQ>

Pentecost 7, Year B,

11th July, 2021

Ephesians 1:3-14 NRSV / Mark 6:14-29 NRSV

Prelude

Welcoming Guests/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Music *Sweet Hour of Prayer* **11**

Call to Worship (Responsive)

One: The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it! From the east to the west, from the north to the south, God's Spirit moves across the face of the earth.

All: From the east to the west, from the north to the south, we gather together, united by God's Spirit, to celebrate God's glory and proclaim His praise!

One: Let's worship God together!

Invocation

O God, we thank you that today you have called us to worship you and learn of you. You alone know our needs. Satisfy them with your unchanging love. In your presence may we find comfort in sorrow, guidance in perplexity, strength to meet temptation, grace to overcome the fascination of disobedience, and courage to face up to the hostility of this rebellious world. Above all, may we meet Jesus and go out from our worship indwelt by his spirit. This prayer we ask to your glory and in his name. Amen.

Epistle Reading Ephesians 1:3-14 NRSV

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
just as he chose us in Christ^[a] before the foundation of the world to
He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,
to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace
that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight
he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,
as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,^[b] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,
so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.
In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;
this^[c] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory* 366

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we are overwhelmed by the wonder of your mercy and love! You have so liberally poured out your unfailing and unconditional love upon us, and restored us to yourself through your forgiveness of our sin. Your words of peace—your shalom—has warmed our hearts, enlivened our minds, and encouraged our spirits—and for this, we praise and honour you with songs of joy.

Renewing God, your righteousness has smiled upon us with love and compassion, and you seek to guide us on our pilgrimage, so that we do not return to our foolish ways. We listen for your words of truth and peace, your guiding and blessed words of salvation, so that right living and right relationships can come together in the joy of your shalom.

Trustworthy God, we praise you for your many blessings in the past, and the way you have renewed and redeemed us. You have not only poured out you love, but your mercy has flowed over us in such a way that it encompasses us with its richness and glory. Because this has been our own personal experience of God's goodness, we look with anticipation to future experiences of God's gracious generosity and bounty.

Inspirational God, you prepare the way ahead for us, so that in peace and joy we may journey onwards to our home in you. Amen

Gospel Lesson Mark 6:14-29 NRSV

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' [a] name had become known. Some were [b] 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[c] 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;[d] 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[e] 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[f] 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.

Message – Conflicted

Wow! That's quite the dramatic story isn't it. A tale full of tragedy, sex and intrigue. Something that would be worthy of late night prime time or a Netflix series perhaps. When we hear these kinds of stories in the bible, it's easy to focus on the juicy details, isn't it. A king engaging in adultery with his brother's wife. A daughter performing dances for the court's amusement. A gruesome murder with the macabre presentation of the victim's head served on a platter. Sounds like a box office winner, doesn't it. This potpourri of sexual lust, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder has provided endless inspiration for artists and

writers, ancient and modern. Titian, Caravaggio, and Gustav Moreau, among others, painted it. Oscar Wilde wrote the famous play *Salome* about it, and Richard Strauss used it as the basis of his very successful opera. Ken Russell and Bill Wilder incorporated it into films. Probably no aspect of the New Testament apart from the passion of the Christ has provided greater stimulation for the artistic imagination. The problem is when we focus on the scandalous, we can often miss the truth that's hidden in plain sight.

The real theme of this story, however, is not the drama of life and death, love and hate, that so easily captivates our imaginations; it is the confrontation of political power and prophetic faith. The great struggle is between baptizer and king. And it is a complicated tension because, far from being the usual battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness – a theme as common in religion as in pulp fiction! – light and dark, good and evil, are mixed in both of the key players in this drama.

That is obvious enough where Herod is concerned. He is by no means a standard villain. There is that within him that recognizes in the witness of John the kind of human authenticity to which he too is called. The forces of self-aggrandizement and lust that are powerfully at work in his life – and all the more at work because he does not actually possess the secure power his office boasts, being a Roman vassal – are nonetheless countered by a desire to lean into the good that John presents.

Like Paul states in Romans 7, Herod too might well confess, “I find that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inner most self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!”

Consider the personal and social dilemmas in which Herod finds himself in this passage. He is trying to negotiate multiple complicated relationships within his household and society and discovering that it is quite difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold his personal standards. He is at odds with his wife

over John the Baptist and at odds with John over his wife. He is eager to appear a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilean society and troubled by his daughter's request for John's execution. His relationship with John evokes mixed feelings of fear, perplexity, and protectiveness.

Herod is quite conscious of how social perceptions shape one's possibilities in life, yet he is seeking some measure of truth by which to guide his life choices. He is caught in a web of relationships that seem to render him a "reactor" rather than an "actor" in the drama of life.

But we do no service to biblical faith when we make John the Baptist, on the other hand, to be the example of pure goodness. He was after all, a human, subject to the same foibles and temptations as us all. Wasn't there some reason both mother and daughter were so fatefully drawn to him? Could it not be, as it has so often been with the heroes of morality, that his heroic self-discipline cloaks a sinful pride and judgmental character? What makes the encounter of the prophet and the king so poignant is that they understand each other well enough.

The puppet king knows enough about the truth to recognize his own falseness; and the prophet is sufficiently acquainted with temptation to desire his monarch's liberation from it. Their meeting could have been full of the redemptive grace discussed in our reading from Ephesians today, but one great flaw prevented it:

Herod's insatiable quest for preeminence – having it, keeping it, flaunting it. Not sexual lust but a lust for power is the problem this text illuminates. That sex is prominent in the account is not surprising, for as has been said famously by Henry Kissinger, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac." Such power must resist truth – not only the small truths that reveal our small transgressions and guilty secrets, but the great truth that the claim to power itself hides, generation after generation, that we are not really as in charge as we may think, any sovereignty we think we have is an illusion.

What prophetic faith wants above all to reveal is the absurdity of our pretense to sovereignty. How much do we as individuals, and as the body of Christ, face some of these same conflicts? Daily life in our world today can present a series of

Herod-like personal and spiritual dilemmas for persons to negotiate. For a harried mother of a toddler, there is the question of how best to love and parent a child in the face of a defiant “No!” and a full-fledged tempter tantrum in aisle 6 of the grocery store at the end of the long day. Young adults experience the angst of competing for acceptance in desirable social cliques, of serial broken hearts in the complex world of adolescent dating, of familial tension over becoming more independent and acquiring more responsibility. Across the lifespan, persons question who they are and how they should act as life pushes and pulls them in conflicting directions.

And as in the story of Herod's struggle, there are lives at stake as they decide which actions they will take. Likewise, contemporary church leaders also struggle sometimes like flies caught in a sticky web of congregational politics. Different cohorts clash over issues as theologically mundane as the color of the carpet in the narthex and as theologically central as the shape of congregational worship.

A community's perceptions of how well its leaders negotiate the settlement of these issues can bolster or compromise the ability of a pastor or lay leader to minister or lead effectively. Even spiritually centered and capable leaders may squirm when confronted with congregants determined to push an agenda to accomplish a goal they hold sacred. Most church leaders have capitulated at least once in their ministry to the insistent demands of some individual or group in order to save face or keep the peace. It is only human to care what others think and to want to please those around us `by minimizing conflicts. One need not be Herod to understand what Herod is going through as his birthday festivities take an unexpected turn.

The challenge for the 21st century church is to read our own decisions in light of this story and ask ourselves whether the choices we are making are self-protective and self-comforting, or part of God's transformation of the world. In these times of shrinking attendance and resources, it's easier to try to maintain stability and equilibrium at all costs instead of choosing the messy, chaotic process of transformation that participating in a spirit lead endeavor may entail. It's a very

human condition and seeking the path of least resistance is a very human coping mechanism.

In our own lives, when we face the struggle between what is prophetically faithful, and what is politically expedient and minimizes conflict, how do we lean? As the body of Christ, do we just selectively appease and conform to minimize dissent, going with the flow, or do we look for God's prophetic work in action, and step out in faith in potentially unpopular ways? Like Herod, we have tough choices to make in our lives and in our community. I hope and pray we follow the advice of the one Herod thought was John reborn, our Savior, and choose the path of faith he models. Amen.

Call to Serve

When David danced rejoicing before the Arc of the Covenant, his joy was not complete until he had made an offering of thanks, and distributed gifts of food and drink to all who were in need. Perhaps the most joyful and challenging of all the commandments is to generosity and mutual care: to love one another as God loves us. Let us gather our gifts of time, talent, and substance together and offer them to God in gratitude, heartfelt commitment, and praise.

As we listen to the following music from Annie, let's reflect on the choices we can make in the following weeks to use our talents and time to further God's prophetic work in our community and world, making the difficult choice of faith over comfort and convenience.

A Time for Reflection

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Beloved Jesus, you surprise us by naming us your friends. Your dance of faithfulness and life, open before us a way of unexpected justice, mutuality and joy. Take the gifts we have to offer and bless them and let them serve your people at home and throughout the world, all of us, your cherished friends.

HYMN

***Wonderful Grace of Jesus* 150**

Benediction(responsive)

One: It is time to go out and share God' secret purpose
which has been disclosed in Jesus Christ.

All: With God's help, Amen!

One: Share that secret with others by the way you live:
with the words on your lips,
by the deeds of your hands,
with the prayers in your minds,
and through the love in your hearts.

All: With God's help, Amen!

One: The grace of Christ will redeem you
the enduring love of God will support you,
the friendship of the Holy Spirit will accompany you,
this day and ever more.

All: Amen!

Postlude