

Pentecost 8, Year B
Mark 6:14-29
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When I was a freshman at the University of Oregon I learned that the standard political science definition of “power” is *the ability to get people to do something they otherwise would not have done*. If, for example, you would like to get your spouse a second cup of coffee in the morning and your spouse would enjoy one, then no power has been exercised when you bring the second cup. If, on the other hand, your spouse asks for another cup of coffee while you would just as soon continue pondering the morning crossword, then no matter how willing you are to interrupt your efforts to accommodate the request, your spouse has exercised power over you, because you are now doing something you would not otherwise have done, at least at that moment.

That definition has helped me notice how power is used both for good and for ill in a variety of ways all the time, and it has helped me see as well how the exercise of power is an essential part of every single human relationship. When it comes to power, the issue is never: “do we have any?” All of us have power, every single one of us. The issue is how we use it, and what we use it for. That is why this definition of power illuminates today’s reading of the dismal and gruesome story of the beheading of John the Baptist, and as well it shows us a way to understand and critique the modern holders of power, including ourselves. As important, it helps us understand the way the gospels interpret Jesus, and why that interpretation remains relevant to this day.

Based upon this definition of power, it is clear that Herodias is a powerful person in our story. She is able to get King Herod to do something he was manifestly afraid to do, execute John the Baptist. Less clearly, but perhaps more important, John the Baptist is a powerful person in this story. Herod feared John, because there was something in the Baptist's righteousness and holiness that intimidated Herod, even though he was both perplexed and fascinated by him. Thus, both Herodias and John have power over Herod that works on the king in opposite directions. Herod the king, the man with all the institutional power, turns out to be the weakest figure of all. Now notice what tips the balance. Herod's fear of John is overcome by his fear of appearing weak in front of his courtiers, and so to preserve the appearance of being powerful, he has John executed on the spot. His regard for his power renders Herod powerless, and leads him to do something terrible. That, folks, is something that happens all the time as people prove just how powerful they are by doing something they don't want to do.

Robert McNamara, as we now know, was convinced by the mid-sixties that we couldn't win the Viet Nam war, and he conveyed that concern to Lyndon Johnson. But neither the President of the United States nor the Secretary of Defense, two of the most powerful people in the world, were willing to be honest with us the American people for fear of appearing soft on communism, and for fear of presiding over the first clearly lost war in our country's history. So they did something they did not want to do, and continued the war. Of course none of us have any idea how often members of Congress do things they don't want to do because they understand the power structure of their party, or the dangers involved with potential challenges in primaries from the left for Democrats and from the right for Republicans. What we do know is that it hap-

pens all the time. Indeed, that is the way Congress, pressured both by big, big money and active bases, works these days.

Herod died nearly two thousand years ago, but he lives on in the hearts and minds of everyone whose fear of losing power causes them to do things they don't want to do, and even believe they shouldn't do. I can say this not simply because I read about Herod's activities in the paper every day, but also because I can feel the presence of Herod in me. I thought a certain initiative in the Diocese of Spokane was not only a waste of money, I believed it reflected horribly misplaced priorities - and still do - but in order to appear to be a "team player," in order to preserve my status with the powers that be in the diocese, I supported it outwardly, and even assembled a Cathedral team to participate in it for a full year. My fear of risking my place led me to use my power in a way that revealed how powerless I was. Herod lived for a time in the office of the Dean of St. John's Cathedral in Spokane, Washington. I will not tell you how many times I did the same thing while I was the rector here.

This fear of losing status, position, that leads so many people to use their power in ways they don't want to use it, supporting causes they don't believe in, is one important means I use to understand Jesus as he is interpreted in the Gospels. Jesus rejected all the outward trappings of power society identifies as important. He was poor, even destitute. He remained a Jew his entire life, never once proposing to start a new religion. He rejected every opportunity to establish a base of operations, preferring instead an itinerant life. Unlike some scholars, and I am not a scholar, I don't believe he even tried to start a movement. I believe he was simply relentlessly honest and brutally clear about his understanding of the Kingdom, and because he had nothing to protect, he always was able to act as he desired. Yet paradoxically his complete lack of power

was the very basis of the kind of power he wielded; there was no way to get to him, no way to inspire him with the kind of fear that would lead him to do things he didn't want to do in order to maintain his position and status, because he didn't have any, at least not in any temporal sense.

The basis of his power was rooted in an unconditioned regard for all people, rooted - to use shorthand religious terminology - in God's love. No matter what happened, no one could stop him from doing that; no one could appeal to means and ends, short term sacrifice for long term gain, giving a little to get a lot, and no one could threaten him with the loss of power if he didn't do the "right" thing. His power base had nothing to do with temporal authority, so no appeal to maintaining temporal authority could affect him. Those who live this way are the only ones who are truly free, and indeed, the only ones whose power can never be threatened by anything or anyone.

This is why the story of the beheading of John the Baptist remains important for people like me who are not yet truly free. I look at that story and now have a way to interpret what happens as a result of my own fears about my position, my power, my status. When fear leads me to use my power merely for the sake of maintaining it, I prove to myself that I am just another person whose power has made him powerless, whose strength has made him weak. I prove as well, therefore, that my guide and mentor is not Jesus, but Herod. And that is true not just for me, but for everyone in this world who operates the same way. This story shows us how to look both at ourselves and at our leaders and evaluate what they are really doing, not just what they claim to be doing.

Addiction to power, fears of losing it, affect us all in one way or another. The more we have, the more susceptible we are to becoming like Herod. It is a simple and I believe entirely

accurate explanation for why Congress and the White House - including especially the White House staff - are the most enmeshed in Herod's style. It is why as well, I reject both the conservative and the liberal hope that we can transform ourselves if only we adopt the proper reforms uninhibited by people who oppose us. We haven't, and we won't. But because of Jesus I continue to believe that God can transform us, that unconditional regard for all people, sneaked into us by God's grace - most often against our will - changes people, and leads them to that place of true freedom of action, where at last, heedless of any temporal consequences, they love as God loves and live for others as God lives for us. That is true power.