

Mark 6:14-29, and a light from Eph 1:3-14 in Year B, Proper 10

Mark's version of beheading John the Baptist

Delivered at Saint Michael and All Angels, South Bend, IN, July 12, 2015

Stay in the tension of holy disagreement until Christ gives you a head to see it anew.

What are you passionate about? For or against? What makes you apoplectic in conversation? What topics are you ready to discuss or defend tooth and nail? It's Sunday, a polite church day, so these may not be fresh on our minds. What about topics like the Confederate flag? Same gender marriage? The death penalty? Hillary Clinton for president? Fox News or CNN? Democrat or Republican? Notre Dame or USC? Believe it or not, not everyone in this room roots for ND. That's why we have confession.

Would you yell passionately, football style about being a Baptized Anglican Christian? It would be nice if our blood stirred to that idea, eh? Would you, could you, fight or die for that identity, that religious right?

For or against, there is much to be passionate about. So much, like Herod in today's Gospel we may lose our cool, getting caught up in the moment; or like John the Baptist we may be so powerless and subject to our convictions that we lose our heads. Some of us have that sense that when we argue we profess our position and passions from a place of authority, like Herod who has the power, and some of us sense that we argue and stake our claim we do so from a place of prophecy, like John. Our Gospel today highlights an important, tragic event that had a significant impact on Jesus and his ministry but it also serves as parable for the often tense relationship that exists between **power and prophetic voice**. The first question is why did the tension between them continue in the first place? Why didn't Herod simply kill the prophet who was maligning his wife? Our modern American mind thinks first of political expediency, it would have made a martyr of his enemy. To quash John immediately it may have started a revolt, and that would have put more than a damper on Herod's birthday plans. However, the answer is far more nuanced than simple politics and management tactics. We can see deeper reason right there in Mark's Gospel.

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

It may have been the dark, apocalyptic teaching of John that Herod liked to be entertained by or it may have been **the one place Herod knew he could hear the truth**. That's not such an unusual notion for a leader. We have an example in our own day.

George W. Bush could have chosen any church in DC to attend when he was president. He actually went to a few protestant churches that spoke the Word of God to him in his own native, evangelical language that would fit neatly with his Republican party agenda. However, early in his administration President Bush settled on St John's Episcopal Church on Lafayette Square. He attended every other Sunday at the 8 a.m. service, with some regularity. The Rev Luis Leon is the pastor there, he's the one who gave the prayer at Barack Obama's second inauguration, and is a priest far more to the left than President Bush. Luis says that when the President of the United States is in the congregation, the preacher may be speaking to the whole congregation, but you're aware that everyone in the room is listening to the sermon through the ears of the most important man in the room. And Luis preaches the Gospel in a more leftist language that President Bush

would be accustomed to hearing. Why would the president do that? Was he perplexed and intrigued? Or was it the one place he knew he could hear a deeply opposing view in a safe and respectful environment, where no one would lose their head.

The Church helps us, and should be a place, where we may stay in dialogue, especially with those who perplex us, vex us and intrigue us with their difference of thought and value.

It's easy to want to be in a room of like minded Christians who dress, think, talk, look and smell like us. And often what we do when we disagree and when we find issues to fight over, we lose our heads, cut off from relationship and separate. What do we do? We form the new church down the street, we add the word "reformed" "true" or "new" to the title. The history of the Episcopal Church is rife with churches defined as "not them" up the street, where they wanted candles on the altar, free pews, not purchased or rented, white robes instead of black robes, you laugh, it's true...white people instead of black...not to mention recent examples.

Rabbi Jack Moline, another clergy I knew in DC, used to say that he observed that Jews start with community and hope to move to faith, but Christians, we start with faith and make that the basis for our community; when disagreements about faith arise the Christian community breaks apart... Whatever happened to the indelible mark of baptism?... Schisms have been with us since 33 A.D., but we've wrestled with the unity that Christ calls us into since then as well, and Mark's version of the story about King Herod and John the Baptist highlights what happens when our passions get the best of us, when we stop listening and start making promises we shouldn't, when we force ourselves into immovable, intractable positions and find ourselves up against consequences we later regret.

On any hot button issue: slavery, women's ordination, same gender marriage, especially among Episcopalians you may have heard the phrase "Christians of good conscience disagree" but how are we supposed to agree when we know holiness and the kingdom of God is at stake? How are we to remember our brother or sister is a baptized Christian? Not lose our heads over our convictions? Keep from drawing lines in the sand on issues of extreme importance?

Keith Lamdin, the soon to be retired head of Sarum College in Salisbury, England, teaches courses on leadership for Christian clergy, and what he has to say about managing ourselves in such disagreements applies equally to all Christians. (There's actually good evidence that the Christian charism, when applied aright helps to form quality leaders.)

He says we need to strike a balance between being **passionate** and being **curious**. Be passionate: Stand with your convictions, know why you know what you know so you may articulate them, but watch that your passions don't shut out or shut down. Remain curious: Herod was "perplexed" Herod was curious. As long as he stayed that way, the dialogue could continue. There was tension there to be sure, but that tension, as hard as it was for Salome's mother, and with a tinge of shame in the air, that tension meant that there was still a relationship and listening going on between power and prophecy.

(Ed Friedman of family systems would say it differently than Keith Lambdin, but intend that same advice in the face of division: **stay differentiated but stay connected**. Be yourself but remain in emotional closeness to the one who is very different.)

But how long must we remain in this tension or linger in the smell of the shame of another brother or sister who thinks, votes differently or espouses a power or prophecy that is counter to my own beliefs? **Stay in it until God puts a new head back on.**

John lost his head, Herod lost his truth telling prophet. The tension between them was resolved but at a deep, deep loss for both. Normally the lesson from the second, NT reading is free floating and simply a consecutive reading from St Paul, but the portion to the letter to the Ephesians today gives us the answer to the deep loss of losing our heads or to the ongoing urge to cut off the head of another in an argument.

“Gather up all things in Christ” from Ephesians 1:10 is the phrase, and the word *Ana-kephaliosis* is the “gather up” language. It is a word often hard to translate. It’s actually used in the world of debate and rhetoric. It refers to the conclusion made in an argument; it is a summation, and it literally translates as “putting the head” on. But here with Paul it is not the voice of one side or the other that offers the headship, it is Christ who does so, it is he who has the last word and puts our disagreements into a new perspective, a new head, as we see he so often does when the teachers of his day try to trap him in an either/or situation.

I’m sure Fr Luis Leon never shamed President Bush in a sermon, but I know he challenged him. I’m sure some of us have been challenged by sisters and brothers right here in this room. Resist the urge to cut off the head, resist the urge to shame your brother or sister opponent; **Stay in the tension of holy disagreement until Christ gives you a head to see it anew.** Even if you lose your head, though, even if you cut off or cut down another, there is still good news that Herod and John missed in the tragedy of today. There’s also room for resurrection. Even the head that was cut off will, if placed into Christ’s holy hands, we will find it returned in the summation of all arguments. Broken relationships and broken churches shall be restored under the headship of Christ, in his time. But let us stay passionate and curious, at home in our convictions and in our conversations that invite Christ in. pray you lose not your head, but that it is properly returned to you and your neighbor.