

Proper 10B 2021 Sermon

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.

As some of you know, I flew to Chicago to visit my Dad on Father's Day. I cannot remember the last time I had been with my Dad on Father's Day. Normally, I just send a card.

Now, if you've ever shopped for Father's Day cards, you know that a lot of them have pictures on the front of the card showing fishing or hunting gear, or power tools, or hamburgers simmering on Weber grills. But whenever I have shopped for a Father's Day card, I have always looked for one with a picture of a golfer or a golf green, since my dad has loved to play golf since he was a child. He tried to teach me how to golf, but it never took. And yet, I always loved to go golfing with Dad, just to experience the incredible beauty and peace and serenity and quietness of the golf course.

And so it shook me at a deep level when I read that, on the afternoon of July 3, the pro at the Pinetree Country Club in Georgia was fatally shot in the head on the 10th green.¹ Given my fond memories of the beauty and peace and serenity of

golfing with my Dad, “golf course” and “gun violence” couldn’t possibly be used in the same sentence. It just didn’t compute.

A similar, jarring incongruence of images appears in today’s Gospel. King Herod is hosting a birthday banquet (for his own birthday, of course), at which his daughter dances, delighting Herod so much that he says to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” And she answers, “Bring me the head of John the Baptist on a platter, now.” And here’s the thing: Herod does **not** say, “How on earth could you ask such a thing? I could never do such an immoral and murderous act!” Instead of saying **that**, Herod, who is (as *The Message* translation puts it) “unwilling to lose face with his guests,” accedes to her wish, and the severed head of John the Baptist is brought into the birthday party on a platter. Again, in my mind at least, birthday parties and severed heads do not go together, any more than golf greens and fatal shootings.

What we have here is a stark contrast of kingdoms: the kingdom of **this** world, ruled by power, appearances, money, and often violence; and the kingdom of God, ruled by vulnerability, integrity, self-giving, and peace.

And the fact is, my friends, we have a *choice* as to which kingdom we give our allegiance.

Now, of course, we all live **in** this world, with its economic, governmental, and social systems, and its values. So, in *one* sense, we have **no** choice but to live in the kingdom of this world, any more than a fish could choose not to live in water. This world’s systems and cultures and values are the very air we breathe.

But if we stop, step back, and honestly look at what is happening in our world, we will undoubtedly see that there are *some* things **very** wrong in the kingdom of this world. That golf pro who was shot dead on the 10th green left behind a wife and two children, ages 6 and 7. That is just **wrong**. That same 4th of July weekend, at least 232 Americans were killed and 618 injured by gun violence in this nation.² There is something profoundly **wrong** with that image: the only loud noises we hear during the 4^h of July weekend **should** be firecrackers, not gunshots. In visiting with my older brother in our hometown in suburban Chicago over the Father’s Day weekend, he told me that he won’t go downtown to Chicago anymore, for there is no longer *anywhere* in the city of Chicago where he feels safe. “The Magnificent Mile isn’t magnificent anymore,” he told me. In this past Wednesday’s *Chicago Tribune*, it was reported that there have been 364 homicides in the city of Chicago so far this year.³ 364 unique and irreplaceable children of God meeting a violent death at the hands of other unique and irreplaceable children of God.

That is the kingdom of this world; and that is just **wrong**.

For decades, tobacco companies insisted that smoking does not cause cancer, even though they *knew* that it did. How many lives could have been saved if those corporations had acted from a place of caring for people rather than boosting their bottom line at any cost? For who-knows-how-many years, the Church turned a blind eye to priests who were abusing children. How many children could have been saved from lifelong trauma had the Church acted with integrity and honesty? Corporations and government leaders have turned a blind eye to the reality that the greenhouse gasses we have spewed into the atmosphere since the dawn of the Industrial Age have been causing significant change in the climate of our planet; and we are reaping the life-threatening results today. For years, the company that holds the mortgage on my house, Wells Fargo, put unbelievable pressure on their bank managers and employees to open new accounts for their clients, for which the managers and employees received bonuses. Bank employees opened 1.5 million checking and savings accounts and issued more than 500,000 credit and debit cards for their customers without the customers' knowledge or authorization.⁴ We put our money in banks in order to keep it safe; we never imagine that these trusted institutions might surreptitiously and dishonestly **use** us to pad their bottom line and raise the price of their stocks.

Now, I ask myself, "What kind of people do these things?" And then I realize: it's people not all that different from you and me, *when we allow ourselves to be taken over by the culture and values and motivations of the kingdom of this world*, that kingdom in which we all live and breathe.

The Gospel-writer Mark places this story of the beheading of John the Baptist right *after* the story in **last** week's Gospel, where Jesus sends out his 12 disciples in pairs to heal people, telling his disciples "to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money..." (Mark 6:8, NRSV) They are to be totally vulnerable, totally dependent on what other people might offer them. Viewed from the perspective of the kingdom of this world, they were paupers with no money, no social standing, no power. Mark wants us to contrast those disciples, sent out to heal, with King Herod in today's Gospel, who, with a simple word, could chop the head off a holy man in order to save face. Mark wants us to ask, "Who holds the *real* power – the Disciples with no food or money, or King Herod, who throws a banquet for his own birthday and whose commands are immediately obeyed, however twisted they may be? Mark wants us to see that, despite his wealth, his title, and his power to kill at will, Herod is nonetheless at the mercy of what other people think of him; and in that sense, **he** is not a *ruler* at all, but rather a subject to the rule of public opinion, powerless before his own fear of losing face. The 12 Disciples in last week's Gospel, on the other hand, were told that if **they** were rejected by the people, they were to simply shake the dust off their feet. Now, which of these – King Herod or the Disciples – was more free?

Bible scholar David Lose writes, "[T]hat's the choice that Mark puts before us: which kingdom do we want to live in? Or, at least recognizing that we have no

choice but to live in the kingdom of the world to *some* extent, to which kingdom will we give ultimate allegiance?”⁵

My friends, if you are at all like me, most often you don't even recognize that there *is* another choice! The kingdom of this world and its systems and values and motivations so surrounds me and colors my perspective that it often **seems** like the *only* kingdom there is! When we watch the evening news, Dr. Lose notes, “we have paraded before us the triumphs and tragedies of the day as if they are simply givens, as if there is no other way of being in the world and relating to each other.”⁶ As if there is no **other** way of being in the world and relating to each other.

But, my friends, there **is** another way; we **do** have a choice! We don't have to see one another and God's amazing Creation through the default lens of the kingdom of this world, which so often leads us to using other people and God's Creation for our own selfish purposes.

“Seek first the Kingdom of God,” Jesus said, “and live righteously, and God will give you everything you need.” (Matt. 6:33) Or, as *The Message* translation reads, “Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”

We don't *have* to watch the evening news and simply conclude, as Walter Cronkite did, “That's the way it is.” There is another way of being in the world and relating to each other. It's called “living within the kingdom of God.” Steeping our lives in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions.

Our Father in heaven, **Thy** kingdom come, **Thy** will be done on earth.

AMEN

1 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/07/09/suspect-bryan-rhoden-arrested-pinetree-country-club-shooting-gene-siller/7912391002/>

2 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/05/us/us-shootings-july-fourth-weekend/index.html>

3 <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-chicago-homicides-data-tracker-htmlstory.html>

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wells_Fargo_account_fraud_scandal

5 http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-7-b-a-tale-of-two-kingdoms/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+daavidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29

6 http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-7-b-a-tale-of-two-kingdoms/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+daavidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29