

In the Absence of Heart – Mark 6: 14-29
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
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Once there was a farming town that could only be reached by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road, especially at the curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure they were Good Samaritans. And so they were, as they would pick the people up on the road, for this was religious work. One day someone suggested they buy an ambulance to get the accident victims to the town hospital more quickly. The preacher preached and the people gave, for this was a religious work. Then one day a councilman suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve. Now it happened that the mayor had a farm market right at the curve on the road, and he was against taking out the curve. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation next Sunday about it. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better stay out of politics; so next Sunday the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan Gospel and encouraged the people to continue their fine work of picking up the accident victims – which they did.

Do you know the difference between a good sermon and a meddlesome sermon? A “good” sermon is when it meant for others to hear. A “meddlesome” sermon is when it is about me.

Today’s gospel lesson is about “meddlesome” sermons, well, kind of a sermon, anyway. It is easy to think of this passage as the story of the death of John the Baptist, but it really isn’t. It really is a story about King Herod, who was the son of the Herod who Matthew speaks of, the Herod that ordered the death of children at the time of Jesus’ birth. It is also about Herodias, Herod’s wife who, was the wife of Herod’s brother, who was still living and Herod’s stepdaughter Salome. It is believed that Salome was a young girl.

The story is well known. It is King Herod’s birthday; most likely the wine and dancing had loosened up everyone, including the King. Herodias brings her young daughter to the party and, when Herod is sufficiently drunk, mom tells her to dance. Of

course, we would have serious issues with this activity but Herod was King, and he got away with anything he wanted to get-away with. The young girl dances, and when offered anything she wants by Herod, the girl turns to her mother to learn what she is to ask for. It turns out to be the head of John the Baptist on a serving platter. It is about as ugly of a story as it gets.

The reason John ended up dead was because he “meddled.” It was one thing for him to be miles away preaching to whoever would walk into the wilderness to hear him. It was another thing to take on the most powerful person of the land and tell him that what he is doing is wrong and must end it. That is how good people end up dead. Most people learn that there is a time when you keep your mouth shut. You keep your mouth shut when you are interfering with the way a powerful person makes money or the way he/she lives.

You may not recognize this, but one of the finest lines and most difficult times of the year in any preacher’s work, in the United States, happen on Memorial Day weekend and July 4th. I am most likely to hear complaints about having either too much or too little recognition and celebration surrounding our national holidays. There are pastors who will center the entire worship service on the national days of importance, and others who will completely avoid any mention of the day. Either approach is likely to offend someone.

In some congregations, it is unacceptable to address anything that comes even remotely close to being political. Some will contend that church is not for politics, yet some of those same voices will protest when a national holiday is not adequately recognized and honored. National patriotic holidays can be a hornet’s nest for pastors. What are we to do? If John the Baptist had waved Roman banners and yelled “Hail Cesar,” he would never had been killed; in fact, he would probably been an honored guest at Herod’s birthday party. But make no mistake about it - John did not avoid politics. His patriotism was strong for the ways of Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures were clear when the prophets Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah called the people to be faithful and practice justice to both God and God’s people. What can be more loyal than doing justice and walking in righteousness and heading the ways of God? The prophet Isaiah wrote:

*...Pay heed to me, my people,
and hear me, O my nation;
for my law shall shine forth
and I will flash the light of my
judgment over the nations.”*

Though I have never said this in public, I say it today. I believe the most patriotic Americans are not those who fly the biggest flag, many flags, or even but one flag, because anyone can do that. Flying flags will not create tension or difficulty for anyone doing that in this country today. The most patriotic Americans are those who defend the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The most patriotic Americans are those who defend these words:

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” (Preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America.)

Defending those words can be dangerous.

John the Baptist died for defending what would be equal to our preamble. Both he and Jesus were among the most loud and powerful political voices of Israel, and for that they would both die.

The greatest danger to the Church, regardless of where the church is, is to kowtow and become subservient to any nationalistic movement. The church is in trouble if in Britain the church professes "Britishness," or if in China the church professes "Chinanity," or if in the United States it professes "Americanity." The Church and the ways of God must never be diluted into a nationalistic religion. If it does, then it will have lost its purpose for life. The church will have been diluted into nothing more than a flavored drink if it mixes nationalism with the ways of God.

The Church must be willing to speak the truth about the ways of God without being diluted by other loyalties, which is why the church in the United States had so much difficulty in the 1960's and 70's. The church became dangerously close to

professing “Americanity” and found itself in conflict with the portion of the church that would not dilute..

Today’s scripture lesson is about mixing nationalistic ways with God’s ways. It is a story about one man, John the Baptist, who refused to water down the injustices and wrongs that he witnessed. He refused to turn a blind eye to Herod and water down the ways of God into “personal” relationships with God. He refused to kowtow and become an honored guest at Herod’s birthday party, but instead he spoke of the wrongs, and became the main course served on a platter at Herod’s birthday party.

It is dangerous to be a Christian. It is dangerous to declare, “The emperor wears no clothes.” It was his voice that got John the Baptist in trouble and cost him his life.

Rev. C. Edward Bowen of Crafton United Presbyterian Church in Crafton, PA writes:

“So often in our world today, people see the wrongs that are taking place around them, they see what the Herods are up to, but instead of speaking up and taking a stand for the truth – God’s truth- many people are content with just silently shaking their heads and whispering to themselves, ‘Ain’t it awful!’”

Being a Christian is dangerous because it can get a person killed. Rev. Bowen also added this:

“Gandhi, the great leader of India who led the movement that brought freedom to his nation, (who) said that he believed to strongly in the truth of his cause that he would be willing to die for it, but he said that there was no cause that he was ever prepared to kill for.”

Many of you know the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was the Lutheran pastor who had a free pass in the U.S., and easily could have remained here during WWII teaching seminary classes, but chose to return to Germany and oppose the Nazi-fication of the Church. A week before the liberation of the concentration camp where he was imprisoned, the Nazis hung him. What you may not know is the influence he and others who resisted Hitler had upon very own denomination.

In the early 1950’s there was a group of young clergymen that wanted to build a visible body of congregations that would exemplify the courage to stand against all evils, as was done by Bonhoeffer and other church pastors in Germany during the Nazi reign.

That was the vision that created the United Church of Christ. A Christian people who would not turn a blind eye to injustices and wrongs. A Christian people who would be willing to die for the liberating truth of God, but would never be willing to kill for any cause.

It takes heart to be a Christian. It takes heart to not turn a blind eye because an important person has a business at the deadly curve of the road. It takes heart to acknowledge that the Church must never go along to get along. It takes heart to know that the Church is not part of any nation, but that the nation is part of the Church. It takes heart to be willing to be a voice that removes you from being an honored guest, then places you in the position of being the main course. Jesus wasn't crucified because he was a "nice guy" or because he only spoke of spiritual matters. He was killed because of his mouth and his heart. It is only the absence of heart that we need to fear, for that is what has the power to dilute us into almost nothing. Amen.