

The dramatic character of this morning's gospel account of the death of John the Baptist is a potpourri of sexual lust, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder. Without it being too much of a stretch, it must remind us of recent headlines and televised scenes in which many of our nation's leaders—elected on platforms of propriety, decency and “family” values—have stumbled on account of humankind's insatiable greed and libidinous desires. Though we would like to believe that human beings mature and change over time, Mark's account of Herod, Herodias, Salome and John the Baptist suggest that even as some things change, the more human beings and our habits remain the same. It seems that our insatiable neediness and proclivity to grab whatever we desire are hardwired in the human psyche, and that intentions for fidelity, honor, integrity, and trust are rare and elusive, no matter what the day and age.

All of us, especially young people, are unfortunately becoming more and more cynical, allowing the bad to overshadow the good and grace of our lives. To some degree, we all recognize the cynicism especially when our nation's elected officials—Presidents, senators, and governors as well as officers and directors of many of our nation's corporations and financial institutions, as well as the clergy of our churches, those in the teaching professions, law enforcement officials and officers of not-for-profit organizations such as the United Way all succumb to the seductive powers of greed, lust, avarice, and the insatiable need for bigger, better and more. All we have gone astray like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires not only of our hearts, but the dark shadows in the deep recesses of our lives. We have been seduced and corrupted by our insatiable needs for power, prestige, and privilege.

Given so many falls from grace by many “well educated” persons, I am surprised when some would suggest that Bible study and religion is boring. If we would understand who we human beings are in all of our confusion, we need look no further than scripture which outlines in great sordid details—avarice, jealous lust, greed and hunger for fame that makes up our deeply troubled, mixed up lives. Even the most cursory reading of the Bible reveals shocking deeds, some of them done in the name of God, filled with shame and degradation and our proclivity to wreak havoc as we blindly grope for meaning in our lives.

For this reason the story of John's beheading has provided endless inspiration for writers ancient and modern. Titian, Caravaggio, and Gustave Moreau, among others painted it; Oscar Wilde wrote a famous play about it (*Salome*) that Richard Strauss used as the basis of highly successful opera; Ken Russell and Billy Wilder incorporated story in films. Probably no aspect of the New Testament apart from the passion of Christ has provided greater stimulation for the artistic imagination.

Is this seduction of Herod Antipas and the subsequent death of John the Baptist a tragedy in the classical Greek or even Shakespearean sense? Artists have usually made it seem so, but a more careful reading of the story may give us another perspective.

Herod Antipas, the weak son of Herod the Great and the main actor in our drama, seems too little capable of the requisite self knowledge to be thought of as a tragic figure. Salome (confusedly called “Herodias” in Mark's telling of the story) appears as too much of a pawn of her angry mother to be regarded as tragic. Perhaps Herodias, the mother and Herod's new wife has the tragic aspect for she deals sordidly with vile vengeance, and yet we do not know enough about her story in order to recognize her “tragic flaw”.

The real theme of this story is not the great drama of life and death, love and hate that so easily captivate our imaginations. It is, rather, something more subtle in all our lives. Though acted out as a great power struggle of John the Baptizer and King Herod, the issue is more complicated because far from a dramatic battle of the forces of light and darkness, the real drama is within the heart of Herod. And if this is true for Herod, so it is real for everyone of us as well. The story of Herod's adultery with Herodias—his brother's wife—and Herod's execution of John the Baptist at first appears to be a great story of the failure of morals and of morality. Yet underneath it all is a more subtle story of the presence and Grace hidden in the ebb and flow of this narrative.

Herod is not our “standard” villain. If we carefully re-read the story, we sense within Herod someone who recognizes something “special” about John. In John, Herod senses someone who is *authentic and real* though John lacks the “trappings” and “things” Herod clings to in his life. Even in Herod's insatiable need for control, power and sex, deep down I believe in his heart he “knows” what is good and “knows” what is the right thing to do. In John, Herod recognizes a man of God who is mysterious and full of Grace. And for this reason Herod has put John in prison. Herod could easily have ordered John to

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6: 14-29

be killed. Instead, intrigued and mystified by this man of God, Herod hides John in prison as we often do with ideas and concerns (like God) about which we yearn to know more, but find confusing and bewildering. Like the Apostle Paul, Herod too also be able to 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 inmost 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! (Ro. 7: 21-24)*

Mark’s story of Herod and John reveals something hidden deep inside of us. It is a life that is filled with Grace, goodness and possibility. Unfortunately, because we more easily see “the bad”, we choose to see evil, corruption and the “underside” of life. And we become cynical and sour and pessimistic. Yet all the while there is abundant Grace, wonder, beauty all around us and inside of us and the willingness and desire to love and to make sacrifice for the sake of God and others.

A brief story to explain what I mean: On other occasions I have shared the fact that when couples come to this church asking that they be married, I ask the couple a simple question on our first meeting—a question striking them usually as quite odd. I ask them to tell me the fairy tale of the *Three Little Pigs*.

Variouly told, the fairy tale is about wisdom, deferred gratification and play. The first of the three little pigs hurriedly constructs a house from straw in order that he might spend more time at play. And the second, like the first, hastily constructs his house from sticks that he too can spend more time in play. The third pig, perhaps more self aware than the others and willing to deny himself time to play, takes longer to build his house as he constructs his house from brick.

In fairy tales as in the world, evil abounds. In this fairy tale, evil takes the form of the big, bad wolf who seeks to enter each home of the three little pigs. Denied entrance, the wolf stands outside each home and huffs and puffs (in spite of the hair on the chinny chin chins of the pigs) and blows down the first and second houses. The wolf consumes both pigs. When the wolf comes to the third house—like a well-constructed and labored-over-marriage into which has been poured patience, time and effort—the “house” will not be blown down no matter how hard the wolf huffs and puffs. In fact, unable to blow that house down, the wolf becomes dinner for the third little pig when the wolf slides down the chimney into a pot of boiling water the third little pig has wisely prepared. The wolf represents evil—a reality in our world that will attempt to tear down love and marriage and relationships that are constructed over many years and by much hard work, struggle and pain.

Evil is real. We are all easily seduced by desires for sex, money, and power. Everyday we are offered choices. Some of the choices are quick and bring easy gratification. Yet like the houses of straw and sticks, such choices most often do not endure. John’s “powerless” preaching confronts the political power of Herod. The Baptist’s *“strange and religious”* life in the wilderness stands against Herod’s indulgences of the flesh. It would appear on the surface of things that John has had no effect on Herod since John dies at Herod’s command. And yet, John has communicated something of such importance and meaning to Herod that Herod will always “know”.

Herod is forced to choose between the innocent and the politically expedient. His moment of choice is a palatable moment of Grace, waiting to be accepted or rejected. Herod rejects Grace, yet we recognize that Herod has made his choice. Succumbing to the wiles of Salome, Herod chooses the politically expedient way. And yet we sense deep in Herod’s heart that in his choosing, he has denied his heart’s deepest desire. Is there redemption and meaning for Herod? Yes. Redemption will come through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who, like John, was put to death for political expediency. Even though Jesus died, Jesus was also raised giving hope to all of us who have constructed our lives from straw and sticks that we are given an opportunity to live in Christ. And this includes all of us Herod’s in this life who can also be raised and redeemed.

Flannery O’Connor, the wise and faithful Southern writer of renown who for a time lived and worked in Ridgefield once wrote: *There is a moment in every story in which the presence of Grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize the moment.*

Grace awaits us all. And how and what will we choose?