

"Keep Your Head"  
 Sermon, July 15, 2018  
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Have you ever sneaked a peak at the magazines displayed at the check-out counter in the supermarket or tables in waiting rooms - publications such as *People*, *US Weekly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The National Enquirer*?

Some are considered to be "Tabloids" - by definition, publications {small newspapers} that give the news in condensed form using illustrations and sensational exaggerated material. They often feature, scandals, sex escapades, murder and gore primarily focused on rich and famous people's lives.

Politicians and actors' faces are often displayed. Recently, a not-so-scandalous one was that Frank Sinatra's First Wife Nancy died at age 101. Who knew? I won't ask for a show of hands of those that have looked through them or "horrors" even purchased them. ☺

Tabloids in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century would have had a heyday with today's Gospel lesson. The story of a "*head served on a plate*" would have been great material.

In 1895 Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem "*If*" as if he was talking to his son giving advice to help him to find his place in the world by describing a stellar life. The first line is

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...*

In our story today it is John who can't keep his head; he loses his head in actuality but Herod has lost his as well in a different sense.

The beheading is a gruesome tale placed right in the middle of two positive Gospel stories. Context is important. The stories are:

1. The sending out of the twelve disciples and
2. Their subsequent return rendezvous with Jesus when they reported all that they had seen and done.

Right in the midst of these two inspirational stories there is this horrifying tale of the woman Herodias wanting the head of John the Baptist – and getting it. Why?

Previously there had been questions posed about the identity of Jesus – including the possibility that he was the One whom John foretold. Frequently the stories of John and Jesus run comparatively alike. John had a message and dedicated disciples; so did Jesus. John's truth telling ended in his death at the hands of powerful people, while Jesus, too, died at the hands of anxious political authority.

Just as Herod knew that John did not deserve death, similar thoughts of innocence prompted Pilate to disrupt the plans for the execution of Jesus. John's followers took his body to a tomb and we are familiar with the tomb in Jerusalem waiting for Jesus.

Regardless of the similarities in the lives of John and Jesus the important point is that both men spoke truth to power and as it does today, that can lead to danger. And in the middle ....

Whether you are the master or the follower, doing good and right things cannot protect you from being badly hurt. When you identify and name what is wrong in the world there can be genuine risk. When you try to change that wrong there is even greater peril.

This is a story from quite a few years ago when my one daughter used to work for Gallop Poll Company in Washington, DC. Apparently there was a common practice at one point of adding hours to a submitted contract for Government work. One of the employees would not sign off on the proposals that contained "bulked up" hour totals. Finally he told the responsible persons that he was going to take this information to a government-investigating agency. They fired him on the spot.

But this young man immediately gathered a team of people and organized the documents with data he had been collected and filed a case against the company resulting in Gallop losing some of its good image in its ability to handle government contracts.

Identifying and naming wrongs in the world can be risky. Most of us know what it means when a person is called a "whistle blower," e.g. A *"person who exposes any kind of information or activity that is deemed illegal, unethical, or not correct within an organization that is either private or public."*

That should be enough to make one choose a safer course in life and in today's Gospel story than being a disciple of Christ.

Maybe the placement of this grisly story in the Gospel lesson is to jolt us out of complacently following Jesus by sitting safely on the sidelines – reclining in comfy seats at the banquet table. Maybe the point of the story is to make us look inside ourselves to see if we are following the One whose journey was full of danger and whose final destination was a cross.

There are times when "people of faith" make up arguments to boost their own image of faithfulness – for example, making a lot of noise about sexual morality in lives of a famous people. These are battles in which the seemingly faithful followers are risking little. It's rather ironic that Christians have engaged in battles about sexual morality, at least in the past, while, refraining from fighting about poverty about which the Bible says a great deal.

Jim Wallis - founder of Sojourners Ministries tells a story of the beginning of his organization when he looked up every verse of scripture about the poor, wealth, poverty, and social justice. More than 2,000 texts were found and he and his associates cut them out of an old Bible. *"We were left with a Bible full of holes,"* which he used to take out with him to preach.

If the only confrontations about faith in which we ever engage are about what other people are up to aren't we are more like Herod than we would like to think? Maybe that's why people watch reality TV or read Tabloids, sitting back righteously and commenting, "*That's just not right!*"

It seems that we are drawn to righteousness, but little affected by the association. This "*beheading*" story might be there to remind us that we, too, sometimes "*decapitate*" the truth in order to build up our faith, at least in the eyes of others.

We compartmentalize our faith and place it in Sunday ritual of worship for all kinds of reasons – to look good in front of others, or to at least not risk standing out. Consequently, what is supposed to be 24-7 faithful living gets compacted into one hour on Sunday morning.

There is a unsettling story told by writer Kathleen Norris about a young man, who after rough years working on oil rigs, met some drug dealers who were putting together a new network. He fell in with them and thought himself lucky to be working with experienced people.

One day as he was driving with his new partner outside a particular city, the man suddenly pulled the car onto the side of the road. He had seen someone driving past in the other direction and was wondering whether to turn around and drive after him.

"*I need to kill him,*" the driver said deliberately, and he reached down under the seat and pulled out a gun the young man hadn't known was there.

"*I need to kill him, but he's with someone and I don't know who, so it'll have to wait.*" Willie realized that he was involved in something way over his head and lucky for him, he got out of the business. The writer tells Willie's story as a story of salvation. "*He was glad,*" she writes, "*that he had been able to name something as wrong and walk away from it.*" He was fortunate.

We're glad, too, when we have a clear choice to take a meaningful stand. But clear choices in life are few, especially if we spend at least some of our time living in a banquet hall where there is so much power and so much entertainment and so much to eat and drink that the faithful choices can become hard to see--until distant lives have been harmed or even lost and we are somehow involved, if not directly responsible.

The story of John's beheading is shocking and might be meant to shock us out of complacency in a faith that comes at little or no cost. You will note that relatively few Christians are actually called to be martyrs. But all of us who would follow Christ are *called to confront*, as well as we can, the wrong we see around us, and confrontation is never comfortable. To pay that price is to stand with many who followed the path that John prepared for the One who came after him.

The moral of this story then might be: Proclaiming and doing the Good News of God is not about ego, fame, or honor; proclaiming and doing the Good News of God is simply about humble service - regardless of the "achievements" or the ending.

The deaths of John and Jesus warn us that God does not always reward faithful discipleship with an easy life. The prophetic Christian – the one who answers the call to confront, might be beheaded – crucified – thrown to the lions – expelled from college – be arrested - fired from a job – required to apologize....

God doesn't ask you to lose your head for God's truth, but God does ask you to proclaim and "do" the Good News of God in humble service, regardless.

My recommendation to you is for you to keep your wits about you, keep your head on, and in the words of Richard Rohr, my favorite Franciscan Friar and spiritual writer, remember that, *"We are called to be "in Christ," which means we share—always imperfectly, and always in community with others—the call to be the embodiment of God's love in the world. . .*

AMEN.