

**July 15, 2018**

***"Strong and Tender"***

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**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 6:14-29**

**2 Sam. 6:1-5; 12b-19; Amos 7:7-15; Eph. 1:3-14**

Our story today is like a summer horror flick. There are two parallel, intertwined stories, the first of which is the backstory about John and his condemnation of King Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own, and the story of a birthday party in which Herod invited a group of his friends. There's lust and a #MeToo moment with the King's own (underage?) daughter and the King's grandstanding promise to give her whatever she wanted (up to half of the King's kingdom). The King had a massive but vulnerable ego that talked in grandiose terms but was hard-pressed to perform what he promised.

That story intersects with Jesus and his followers who were out in the villages doing ministry. The backstory is given to fill in the details of John's execution. The backstory was blunt and damaging to Jesus and his disciples. I don't think we can over speak about Jesus' own grief.

We're told Herod actually liked John even though John condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife. [Can the King do anything wrong? Can the King walk through the raindrops untouched by such rules as personal ethics?] Perhaps he felt John was a fearless critic with his blunt talk and his willingness to speak truth to the king. They were worthy adversaries. Of course, it was John's public condemnation of the king that put him in prison.

Decapitations in the Middle East have existed for centuries, not just in the Middle East, but other places around the world in history. It's a grisly form of death. Take notice, Herod didn't want to do this, but his pride at reversing himself painted him into a corner and so his obedient servants went dutifully down to the prison cell, cut off John's head, and brought it back to the party on a platter, like so many courses in dinner. I suppose this was the point the party fizzled as the partiers lost their appetite and slinked out.

The word spread fast and when the disciples heard the news, they came to pick up what was left of their teacher to bury him. All this is told as the backstory to what Jesus was doing at the time as he traveled around the countryside preaching and healing when the news arrived. Maybe the news of John's beheading drove the crowds to Jesus. Maybe the crowds responded to John's death with their own desperate sense of grief at the news that must have swept from village to village across the Galilean hillsides. But we shouldn't miss the fact that Jesus had his own

deep grief. With John's death the threat of death hovered close and Jesus began to see how easily death might come to him.

Bad news sometimes comes in waves, doesn't it? Sometimes it comes in sequences. Most of us have lived long enough to realize that when a piece of bad news arrives, prepare yourself because there may be more. You lose your job and sure enough, a short time later, someone you loved wanders off from a relationship with you. You have surgery and your beloved pet turns up missing. A fire burns your house down and along comes another wave of testing that makes you tremble in your soul. It's the story of Job, isn't it?

Jesus felt the news deep down in his soul and this piece of news rocked him and he needed to get away. Everything that happens in life eventually has some meaning, some way for us to accept the experience and to learn from it.

Jesus heard the news of John's martyrdom on the heels of his rejection in Nazareth and something inside him literally came apart. It was the worst news possible. He had been rejected and threatened at home, and now this. John, his cousin and the one sent to prepare the people for his coming, had been arrested and then was brutally murdered by Herod for rendering judgment against the First Family for the king's infidelity.

All of us go through moments of deep pain. We lose someone close to us. We pray and we hold such a one in our hearts and cling to the hope that a different outcome is achieved. We walk in the shadow of death with our loved one. Others are taken abruptly. Here one moment and gone the next. Life is long and the losses we endure mark them with pain and regret.

Sometimes our losses are not to death but to life when a relationship is broken and we lose a friend or some family member to the diseases of friendship and family affinity. There are betrayals and abandonment and insults. We do what we need to do to make amends in those cases where we have caused the breakdown and sometimes we save a friendship but in other cases we both go off in different directions. All these experiences in life are deeply disturbing and cause us to ponder their depths for meaning.

How did Jesus do it? How does he hold his own pain and grieve his own loss while at the same time stay responsive to the needs of the entourage of seekers standing following him? All of life is intertwined, life and death, grief and joy, all dance non-stop with each other day and night. It might not be a friend who dies, it might be a hope, a dream, or a wish. It might be a vision, an opportunity to learn or serve, or a small nudge towards "who-knows-what?" We are intertwined with all these things as we hold the paradox of life-in-death and death-in-life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following ideas about "the growing edge" are adapted from the article, "Look Well to the Growing Edge," by Parker Palmer and Carrie Newcomer, [https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-carrie-newcomer-look-well-to-the-growing-edge/?mc\\_cid=8b78105c68&mc\\_eid=aaa79b290f](https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-carrie-newcomer-look-well-to-the-growing-edge/?mc_cid=8b78105c68&mc_eid=aaa79b290f), 6/18/18

Howard Thurman, scholar and minister in the middle of the last century wrote, "All around us (old) worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born ... this is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and (we) have lost (our) reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash ... this is the growing edge incarnate."

Where is this growing edge? It is the promise of new life. It is often as slow as the growth of a plant, so the process requires patient tending.

There are three steps we may go through. First, is a barely perceptible nudge toward what can be called, "who-knows-what." It may come in the form of a quiet, intuitive sense we've lost our way: We made a wrong turn somewhere, or were forced to take a detour. That's when we have to pull over, get out of the car, take a deep breath, acknowledge we're lost – and resist the anxiety that compels us to look for the well-marked road and miss the clues that point us toward the heart's imperatives.

The second stage might be called simply, an "arrival." In the place where we've arrived (it can be hard to tell whether this is an ending or a beginning), it may feel like an empty space where what came before is long-lost, and what's to come has yet to show up. We will be tempted to fill this emptiness, this in-between place, with work or other distractions because we can't tolerate the ambiguity. Our inner work is to embrace the paradox that new beginnings are also endings.

Last, we might be called to surrender to new life. That likely sounds easier to accomplish when truly it is difficult. What's not to like about new life?

The new and strangeness of the new may bring challenges we can't imagine, let alone surmount. Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel says "we are threatened by resurrection." The principle of resurrection implies there's a death before new life can come.

Parker Palmer says, "There is an endless dance of darkness and light that challenges and enriches everyone's life." At the end of this day of darkness, when Jesus heard what had happened to John, he issued an invitation to his disciples to join him, "*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while*" (Mark 6:30, NRSV). In those times when we have suffered in the valley of the shadow of loss, we may need to do the same, to take a needed rest, so we might recover and so resurrection might indeed come.

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