

First Congregational Church of Montague Trinitarian

Sermon, July 12, 2015

Mark 6:14-29

Sermon: Sealed with the Holy Spirit

Let us pray: May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my mouth be acceptable in your sight our Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

Paul speaks to the Ephesians saying: You too heard the word of truth in Christ, which is the good news of your salvation. You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit because you believed in Christ. (Ephesians 1:13)

Sealed with the Holy Spirit.... How do you feel about that? Sealed can have many meanings... It can mean closed, unopened, covered, plastered, paved, certain, irrevocable or even concealed. A seal can be a stamp used to secure something or a seal can be used to authenticate something. It can be a sign of approval. A seal can be used to keep something hidden or undisclosed for a time.

Sealed with the Holy Spirit... that is what we are according to Paul. It feels pretty important, pretty impressive, pretty special to be sealed

with something as intimate with God as the Holy Spirit. It also feels weighty. What does it mean for our lives as we live them in today's world? Are we closed off, waiting to be opened by some special event or occurrence? Does it transfer a meaning of security to us, as in "Be not afraid?" Or is the meaning more along the lines of authentication and an indication of God's approval for us as the hands and feet of Jesus in the world? Does it confer authority on us each to spread the good news of God's love for all??

Sealed with the Holy Spirit...

And what happens if we choose to accept and live by that authority... what does that bind us to?

In our little corner of the world, as for Christians in all corners of the world, to accept and live by the authority conferred on us via our Baptism, we are bound to live by what...? \_\_\_\_\_ What are the promises that God asks of us? What laws does Jesus ask us to live by... that we committed to at the time of our baptism?

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\_\_\_\_\_? (Renounce powers of evil, profess to follow Jesus, promise to show love and justice and to witness to work and word of Jesus, promise to grow in faith / further Christ's mission in the world)

Today's gospel leads us to ponder how we live that out in the world.

When I initially saw that our gospel lesson today was the story of the beheading of John the Baptist I groaned. I hate stories of violence, especially when they appear in the bible. But, God is still speaking and so there must be, even in this story, a moral lesson...something to guide us in our everyday actions.

Now, John appears early in the story of Jesus (so early... both he and Jesus were in the womb at the time of the first action on John's part!) John is the one who calls us to "prepare the way of the Lord." That makes it interesting whenever he turns up in the readings! On that score, some would say his beheading foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus. But, still, how does this shape our actions today?

We often make meaning from stories by identifying with one of the characters. A story helps us to look at our own actions from a place of distance. It gives us the opportunity to find acceptance and forgiveness, and perhaps it even gives us some incentive for change. In this story, Herod is faced with making a decision between truth and self-interest, something not so uncommon to any of us.

A little history behind the story of Herod Antipas and his wife Herodias will help us here. We notice from the beginning that Herod is torn between his respect, or at least curiosity in Jesus, and his lust for his wife's daughter Salome. The other character in the story is Salome's mother, and Herod's wife, the manipulative Herodias. This was their second marriage. Herodias was previously married to Herod's brother, Herod Philip (Salome's dad). But, Herod Philip wasn't ambitious enough for her. "She met [his brother] Herod Antipas, in Rome, about 28 A.D. and they fell passionately in love. Both obtained divorces and married each other, which created public scandal and family resentments." The makings of a good modern day soap opera!

Herodias noticed that the ideas of John the Baptist both attracted Herod and distracted him from their ultimate desire for him to be named King of the Jews. She seized upon the opportunity of his birthday party to have Salome do her bidding and in the end get John out of the way of their worldly desires for power.

Additionally, Herod was fascinated with the teachings of Jesus and the power he seemed to command. Jesus seeing through his crafty attempts to corral him, is able to avoid him for some time. Eventually though, through Pilate, in the night hours of the Passion, Jesus is brought before Herod. Jesus frustrates Herod by not playing his game. He doesn't answer his questions. Pilate, it seems, may have been sympathetic, or at

least ambivalent, about arresting Jesus and bringing him before Herod for questioning. When presenting Jesus to Herod, he used an anagram, a question which contains the answer when you mix the letters around, a device popular with Romans of antiquity. When Pilate asked “What is the truth? That question alone contained the answer, “It is the man who is here.”\*

Herod, blinded by sexual temptation and the taste of power, doesn't get it though and, frustrated with Jesus' silence, sends him back to Pilate who acquiesces to the call from the crowd to crucify him. Another example of the split between following the truth and bowing to one's self-interest.

Back to the love story of Herod and Herodias, Herodias' brother Agrippa is granted the title “king” by Caligula and when Herod protests he is banned to a remote Roman outpost in Gaul. Herodias, although she could remain, goes with him and that is where they drop out of history together. “The drama of John's beheading and the crucifixion of Jesus [turn out to be] minor events in the passionate love story of Herod and Herodias.”

And this is the poignant question for us: are Jesus and John the Baptist footnotes to our own passions and the dramas of our own personal

history? How seriously do we take being sealed with the Holy Spirit? How much, or how often, do we put aside our own self-interest in order to act according to the laws of love.

I have to ask myself, “Do I not make choices every day like Pilate and Herod, appeasing others, acquiescing to my culture, societal expectations, and to maintain my standard of living? Do I accept the way things are with such studied ignorance and self-interest? Is my love for God, for justice, for the kingdom, as powerful as my devotion to distractions, glittering things, and self-preservation?”

We can apply these questions to any of the issues before us in today’s world ... racism (Black Lives Matter), marriage equality, issue of peace and war. What keeps us in our seats or in our homes when instead we could be advocating for the weak and the poor... for those pushed to the margins and denied the rights and privileges we all so comfortably enjoy?!

John calls us to “repent, forsake your sins, and prepare the way for the Holy One of God.” We are sealed with the Holy Spirit, stamped with God’s approval to be ambassadors of Christ. We are authorized to issue

God's extravagant welcome to all. Prepare the way of the Lord; share the good news with all... Amen and Amen.

\*("For example, (Pilate used "Quid est veritas" (What is truth?), an anagram of "Est vir qui adest" (It is the man who is here).") Each day we must rely on the wideness of God's mercy as we live into the seal of the Holy Spirit. Let us sing of it together in hymn #101 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

\*Resources from The Edge of Enclosure.org Suzanne Guthrie

**John the Baptist preaches the truth no matter the cost. Like the prophets before him he chose Love over safety or comfort.**

**Christians, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13), are challenged to a life of continually awakening and conscience and consciousness, ever strengthening that taut plumb line linking deeper contemplation and increasingly radical action**

**The cost of ignoring the call may be heavier than the risks of responding, as Adrienne Rich suggests (meditation one). No matter what you face in the difficulty of your mission, remember the heart of the call is always Love (meditation two). And you and I never lose the need**

for continual purification,repentance, conversion, as we journey and mature along the unitive mystical path (meditation three).

Enjoy this short retreat as you prepare for Sunday.

- Suzanne

Meditation One (introit)  
deciding to respond

*Prospective Immigrants Please Note*

Either you will go through this door  
Or you will not go through.

If you go through  
There is always the risk  
Of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly  
And you must look back  
And let them happen.

If you do not go through  
It is possible to live worthily,

To maintain your attitudes,  
To hold your position,  
To die bravely.

But much will blind you,  
Much will evade you,  
At what cost who knows?

The door itself makes no promises.  
It is only a door.

-Adrienne Rich 1929-2012

John was sent ahead like a voice before a word, a lamp before the sun, a herald before a judge, a servant before his master, the best man before the bridegroom. ...

... Let us, too therefore, prepare a way for the Lord who is to come into our hearts. Let us remove the barriers of sin by confession and repentance; let us straighten the paths of our life which for too long have been undirected and devious; let us pave the way of true faith with good works. Let us rid ourselves of all arrogance and lift high our fainting hearts. Then, when all is in order, smoothed, and brought into harmony, we shall see the salvation of God as he is, for "his home is in peace and his dwelling in Zion."

-Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz  
c.784-856

**The Last Word**  
**gird up thy loins**

**Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces.**

-Chapter at First Vespers, Jeremiah 1:17 the feastday of the beheading of John the Baptist, (August 29)

\*"What is truth?" Anagrams were popular with Romans of antiquity. For example, Pilate used "Quid est veritas" (What is truth?), an anagram of "Est vir qui adest" (It is the man who is here).

Take away, you who take away the sin of the world,  
these which are sins of the world,  
which I carry from living in the world.  
Take away, you who take away the sin of the world,  
by the merits of him who with that same word of witness  
pointed you out to the world,  
take away the sins that I have contracted in the world;  
take from me whatever is not from you,  
for I hate whatever is from me; and still I hope in you.  
And you, Saint John,  
who showed to the world  
him who takes away the sin of the world,  
by the grace given to you  
gain for me that mercy to take away my sins.

Anselm c.1033-1109  
Prayer to John the Baptist (excerpt)