

Finding Our Callings

Sermon by Jerry Howe

July 15, 2018

Matthew 6:14-29

Some one recently told me, “Oh Jerry, just share one of your stories about growing up and let the rest of the sermon go from there.”

There are only two things about beheadings that I have a recollection of. First, even as a little kid I was into classic film. And any films dealing with the guillotine during the French Revolution always terrified me. Second, and more interesting, is when you bring up about butchering chickens. Any one who had ever been to a farm, grew up

on a farm or had family members who farmed, have vivid recollections, if they were present, for this process. Each family had their traditions for how it went from the start of the butcher, to the table for Sunday dinner. I won't go any further with those stories today. We can discuss them at community hour.

So, in the world of dysfunctional families, well before that term ever existed, we have the home of Herod Antipas, the Herod in today's gospel. Herod goes to visit his half brother Herod Philip the first and though already married to a daughter of a king, falls for his half-brother's wife and ends up marrying her. Now, she happens to be the granddaughter of Herod the Great or in other words,

Herods father and in other words, he has just married his niece. All while his half brother is still living. And all the while being Jewish meaning this was against Jewish law.

Now to add to the dysfunction, Herod's new wife

Herodias's daughter, though not named, but presumed to be Salome does a version of a strip tease at a party.

Herod is so turned on by watching his stepdaughter, niece, grand niece doing a strip tease that he offers her anything up to half of his kingdom. And as any strong mother daughter team, Salome goes to her mother for advice. Now Herodias has a beef with John the Baptist who has warned her and her husband of the sin of this marriage. It was nothing more then the Jewish law of

the day. But to Herod and Herodias they called it fake news, and she was going to get her revenge.

Herod, liked John and listened to John and new that he was a holy man. Hence for a long time had protected John from further persecution. But here he was cornered between power and lust and his need for a spiritual life and his oath. In the end as a ruler of the day he could not go back on his word and John's head is delivered. And we think Jerry Springer is outrageous. I think the story of Herod reminds me of some politicians of today Though we haven't gone back to beheadings just yet.

Ponder all of this for a second. A man lost his head for speaking the truth. The Jewish law that Herod and Herodias should not be married.

John was the first prophet in the bible after approximately a 450-year draught of prophets. His father was a priest in the temple, but John forsake the temple and a more comfortable life when the word of God came to him. He left for the desert for his spiritual retreat.

He and Jesus recognized each other in the waters of their mother's wombs when their mothers both met. They were after all cousins. The next time they would meet would be when John baptized Jesus at the Jordan. Some

scholars believed that from the time this wild and woolly man, came out of the desert and began his simple message of repent the kingdom of God is near, to when he baptized Jesus, to his beheading may have only been six months.

In six short months John had gone from a freak in the desert to a major following of people repenting and being baptized by him. Even our Lord. But there are other passages in the Bible that speaks to all his works and accomplishments. Why this passage of the brutal way that he died? Why this gospel now about his death? As I write this I have a unique feeling for John the Baptist. I am in a congregation of preacher's way better then I.

And to make sense of a religious figure as complex and a life that is so intertwined with the life of Jesus makes me understand that there is some one greater than I who should be preaching this message.

As one friend reminded me, it is easier to preach on the death of Jesus than it is the death of John. Jesus's death was for the world and to reopen the kingdom of heaven.

But why John's death?

John and Jesus's message were so much the same that Herod believed that Jesus was the Baptist raised from the dead.

So as Jesus's death was for us and the world. I see John's death was for us.

John's death made way for the ministry of Jesus that we so much try to follow every day. But John's death reminds of the importance to find our calling in our own ministries. Jesus gives us our goals for living a fulfilled life in Christ. But I feel like John gives us a road map on how to get to the goals of Christ through our own callings and ministries. And I know this statement sounds as complex as John himself.

Jan Richardson states, "The life of John the Baptist was utterly intertwined with the life of Jesus. And yet something about his love of Christ and his singleness of purpose enabled him to remain so much himself. In the fierce and focused rhythm and flow of his living and

dying, the Baptizer beckons us to reckon, with what it means, to divest ourselves in the service of Christ without becoming diminished, without giving up the self that God created.

What distinguishes and directs the flow and focus of our lives? What is the purpose we are known for-or that we struggle toward and long for? How do we abandon ourselves to this purpose and to the One who calls us to it and move ever more deeply into the self that God created us to be?

I am envious of those in the bible who seem to have such a direct calling from God. The birth of Jesus and John were announced to their mothers by Gabriel. If Gabriel

came to announce my birth to my mother, she was extremely tight lipped about it and hence why I struggle to find my calling. But have you ever noticed that those whose callings were so well defined seem to have a gruesome and premature deaths?

So, today's Gospel to me is less about how John's death has come about at the hands of people who were power hungry and morale corrupt. But the reminder to find our spiritual way and calling in a difficult world that maybe more corrupt today than even in the time of John the Baptist.

To look for the signs of our callings in a world that doesn't allow us the solitude of the desert experience .

How do we allow our wild and woolly self out of the confinements of today's society to live out our life's callings in this world and still be true to ourselves. That may also need to be a conversation over community hour.

John and Jesus knew the hard work of there calling to teach us to repent in the waters of baptism because the kingdom was at hand. And was most certainly at hand for them in John beheading and Christ crucifixion.

We may not have a clear understanding of the importance of our calling that Christ intends for us to do. And we most certainly do not have a clear understanding when our time to return to the kingdom of heaven

maybe. But because we know their story we strive to live a life that reminds the world to repent for the kingdom is near. And all of Gods Children say amen.