

Sermon: The power of love
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Trinity Church
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Today's gospel passage is the only story in Mark that has neither Jesus nor the disciples as active participants. Sometimes entitled "The Passion and Death of John the Baptist" the story has an almost folk tale quality to it as it begins with "King" Herod who was not actually a king at all but a more minor ruler (a tetrarch) having a birthday party and a daughter (who was not actually his daughter but a step-daughter) dancing for the crowd. It ends with a gruesome act of John the Baptist beheaded and the head actually appearing on a platter at the party. This seemingly independent story actually positions John's death as the foreshadowing of Jesus's death. And there are many parallels.

In today's passage we see that Herod was "perplexed" by John and yet Herod liked to listen to him. It is said that he recognized John as a "righteous and holy man"; Herod even protected him and when Herod foolishly offered the world to Herodias and Herodias responded that she wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter, Herod was "deeply grieved." But the protection Herod offered John rapidly disintegrated as Herod did not want to refuse his "daughter" in front of the crowd and so he sent out his soldier to bring back John's head.

If we keep reading in Mark, what we will see in a few short chapters later is the parallel story of Pilate who seems both fascinated, and fearful of Jesus, who at one point actually attempts to save Jesus as he can find no fault with him but also wishes to appease the crowd in front of him. And in the end Pilate like Herod succumbs to public pressure.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus die at the hands of men who are powerful and who apparently deeply love their power. Both Herod and Pilate recognize truth and goodness in John and in Jesus; they are both intrigued and perplexed by these holy men and yet they both give way to public pressure to murder them. We may notice in today's passage, the prophet John whom we at times in scripture picture as having a loud, thunderous, authoritative voice is strangely silent in this passage and Jesus when questioned by Pilate had no defense, no answer. What the reader sees to be true for John the Baptist is true for Jesus as well. In both cases, their silence points to a truth that is deeper than words, a power of divine origin. They both die because of a misuse and abuse of power.

The other night I saw the Clint Eastwood movie "Gran Torino." I had been forewarned by a friend that the language was awful (and it was!) and that there was quite a bit of violence (and there was!) but the friend who recommended the movie was someone I trusted and so I watched it. The movie's lead character Walt Kowalski played by Eastwood himself is a gritty, angry, tough old man who lives next door to a Hmong family. During the movie he makes no attempt to hide his dislikes, disapproval or really rather his true hatred for most people, including the Hmong family, his neighbors. (Kowalski actually growls through much of the movie.) Eastwood's character uses every racist term I think I have ever heard and then some to describe the Asians, the Hispanics, the African-Americans and those of European descent who come across his path. The term "politically correct" is not a part of his mind-set. He is truly one of the most miserable of characters.

Over the course of a few days, the Hmong family is faced with attacks by local Hmong and African-American gangs. When one of the members of one of the gangs steps onto his lawn, Walt Kowalski gets out his gun and his arsenal of foul language and saves the Hmong family from this threat of violence. This act of mercy is all done under the guise of protecting his own property. Word travels quickly through the neighborhood that Kowalski has saved the situation so all the Hmong people in the neighborhood as is their tradition bring him armloads of flowers and food and this shower of attention drives him crazy. He

fights it off to the best of his ability but they will not stop trying to show him their gratitude, which I can only interpret as being of a divine nature. The relationship develops into one of great affection and his desire to protect his neighbors from the dark power of the gangs grows stronger; even though Kowalski never sheds the gritty, angry toughness on his outer shell, his heart is changing rapidly and a genuine love for this Hmong family blossoms. In the final chapter after a devastating attack by the gang toward the Hmong family, Kowalski's mission becomes clear to him and he devises a brilliant plan toward the gang members in which he radically sacrifices himself for the family and brings the situation to a point of possible healing (and I won't tell you exactly how in case you want to see the movie and you don't want the ending totally spoiled). I saw a sign in one of our store windows right here on Beverly Street this week that said something like, "*When the power of love overcomes the love of power, then we can have peace.*" The gang members had greedily relished their power and in essence Kowalski shows the power of love prevails, and it is love that will engender justice.

John the Baptist's death story in and of itself is not good news. If we just look at this passage as a complete story, it can be seen as gruesome and cruelly unjust. We see a ruler Herod who loves power more than he can possibly love the truth, more than he can possibly love justice, more than he can possibly love John the Baptist. And yet, John's unswerving sense of mission, that he point the way to Jesus, that he make straight the path for the Christ, that he step back as Jesus takes the lead all points to his total sacrificial commitment, the devotion that costs him his life. For John, it is the power of the love of God that allows him to give all.

The story of Jesus doesn't end with the death on the cross, and in his resurrection we are reminded that the power of love does indeed prevail.

Who are we "in front of the crowd?" Do we succumb to public pressure when it comes to living out our faith? The power we clutch, the power we cling to is not ours to have, and our attempts to be God do not make us God. Can we, like John the Baptist and like Jesus himself, give so radically of ourselves to God and to each other that we might become instruments of God's power? We can know that is it God's power working in us when we act with justice in public and in private, when we are forgiving, accepting and loving of ourselves and others, when we let go of pride and hatred and when we believe that we are worthy of God's love-because we are- and that everyone else in this world is worthy of God's love. In the words of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."
Amen.