

Proper 10B 2018 Bryan Fredrickson

“Our Evolving Christian Story”

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Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

One way we try to make sense of our lives is by telling stories about our experiences. We do this, I think, in order to shape our individual identities so that we can stake our place in the world. We also tell stories about the groups we associate with. These are our communal stories. For example, as Americans, we tell stories about the history of our country because we're proud of our political heritage. In many ways we are an example to the world of independence, ingenuity and a sensitivity to issues of social justice. Likewise, as Christians, we identify with the Biblical stories which make up our religious heritage.

What's interesting about our stories, both individual and communal, is that we never get to the final chapter. They continue to evolve. As we meet new people and have new experiences, our values are reshaped. We become different people. I know I'm not the same person I was 10 years

ago. Though we identify with our past, we know there is a future to be told. This is true of our individual stories and it is true of our communal stories.

We don't know a lot about the story of John the Baptist. What we do know comes from the gospels and from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who was a contemporary of John. From these sources we know that John's mother was related somehow to Jesus' mother, Mary. We know, particularly from Josephus, that he had a huge impact on other people and his teaching attracted multitudes. He apparently wore eccentric clothes and subsisted as a desert ascetic on minimal provisions. He was what we call an "apocalyptic prophet" roaring with words of hellfire and brimstone, urging people to repent of their sins because he believed the final judgment of the world was near.

He was a critic of "worldliness." He stressed the importance of keeping the Jewish law, particularly the importance of abiding by Jewish rituals necessary to purify oneself, such as fasting and washing. We know from the gospels that he baptized Jesus.

And coming to today's gospel reading, we read where he was imprisoned because King Herod Antipas had married his brother's wife (Josephus says it was his stepbrother's wife) while her husband was still living.

This was an unlawful act, the kind of thing that sent John through the roof and he let everybody know it whether he was talking about the king or not. We know from today's gospel that through a rather macabre tale of palace intrigue, John was assassinated. The text makes it clear this isn't exactly what Herod had in mind; that he had a certain respect for, or at least fear of, John and his band of rabid followers. Although I don't know this, I can only assume that John's death caused great consternation and turmoil among John's followers. Chaos is usually the natural consequence of a political or religious group losing its leader.

This is the story of John as we know it. It is interesting to note, as an aside, that John is also revered in the Islamic faith as well as the Christian faith as a prophet.

What impact did John's life have on Jesus? Did Jesus' baptism by John mean Jesus was agreeing with John's theology? Was Jesus taking on the role of apocalyptic prophet, like John, urging people to get right with God because the end of the world was near? There are certainly many who believe that's exactly who he was. But I think that if we take Jesus' teaching as a whole, a different message emerges. First, let's look at how John and Jesus were different.

John himself questioned Jesus if he was the Messiah. John's followers called him a drunkard and a glutton. Jesus seemed to run around with the "wrong crowd," preaching love and forgiveness rather than judgment and penitence. The very people who tried to uphold the law and live their lives in the "right way," the Pharisees, many of whom John probably respected as keepers of the Jewish law, Jesus criticized as being too full of themselves to have any room in them for God. Recall the story in Luke where Jesus set up the scenario of the tax collector who stood in the back of the temple beating his breast asking for forgiveness because he was a sinner while the Pharisee in the front of the temple bragged that he was a model for all because he fastidiously

kept the law, unlike the poor tax collector. Jesus said it was the tax collector who was justified rather than the Pharisee.

And then there's the different views of God that John and Jesus had. John's God was angry, wrathful, demanding sacrifice to be appeased. Jesus called his God "Abba," a familiar name like "Dad," full of love and compassion, like the father of the prodigal son.

Where John preached "separate from the world and be saved," Jesus taught to become one with our fellow man and become whole.

These are two different stories that have merged to create the Christian story. Even though we have our roots in Judaism, Jesus seemed to take John's message and cause it to evolve into a new message. Jesus gave us a different concept of God, a relational God who loves each of us. Christian writer and thinker James Finley said that without God loving each of us in every moment of our lives, we would fail to exist. God loves us so much that he chose to share this life with us, and share our pain and suffering.

So, we see how the Christian story has evolved. Our communal Christian story is not static because life is not static. Our lives are shaped by decisions and actions of others. Sometimes our values change, even the course of our lives change, because of the impact of someone else's life on us. We evolve, and as we evolve, our individual and our communal stories evolve.

Allow me to frame this idea in a more contemporary example. When our forefathers wrote our Constitution, the very foundation of our country's political union, they included the idea that a black slave was to be counted as 3/5 of a person for purposes of the census. A slave wasn't a whole person because he was "property" of another. In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled that Dred Scott, a slave seeking his freedom from his deceased owner, could not be free because he was property of his owner's estate, under the control of the deceased owner's executor. By 1896, well after the Civil War, our High Court ruled in a case called Plessey v. Ferguson that, even though we would now recognize black people as citizens, it was constitutional to treat them as second class citizens. The case arose out of a law in Louisiana requiring separate rail cars for black people and for white people. This so-called "separate but equal" doctrine spilled over into restaurants, movie theaters, public restrooms and public schools. The doctrine was finally overturned as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1954 in the famous Brown v. Board of Education case.

Still the race war raged on. Certain states openly refused to acknowledge the end of "separate but equal." Federal troops were sent into certain states under U.S. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy to gain access to public schools for black children. During this tumultuous period, President John Kennedy and his brother, Bobby, were assassinated, along with Dr. Martin Luther King and other black civil rights leaders.

I remember vividly my father taking my brother and me on a trip to Montreal for the Expo Fair. We flew over Detroit. The pilot of the airplane told us that if we looked out our windows we would see Detroit burning. It was the Detroit race riots of 1967. The sight startled and unnerved

me. My young privileged white life was the epitome of stability and safety. We all remember the Democratic National Convention in Chicago the following year disrupted by riots.

The political turmoil led Congress to pass several non-discrimination laws including the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, among others.

This is a small sliver of our American story. The reason I have recounted it here is to ask you to ponder the sea change in our values as they relate to people of color. In 230 short years (the blink of an eye in cosmological time), from the ratification of our Constitution to the present day, most of us have come to recognize people of color as the children of God that they are, not as somebody else's property. Of course, we still have race relation problems in this country. But we have come a long way from the days when our esteemed forefathers, some of whom were slave owners themselves, classified black people as property. This is an example of the evolution of our communal story.

For over 2000 years, I would argue the Christian story has been evolving. The Christian story did not end with the death of Jesus.

There are those who focus solely on Jesus' promise of the heavenly kingdom once we leave this world of pain and suffering. However, I believe Christ's death also ushered in a New Age where the focus is more on collective consciousness rather than on individual consciousness. As the Christ story evolves, it is necessary that we no longer think in terms of our individual salvation. In order to bring into fullness the Spirit of Christ, we must think more in terms of OUR story rather than MY story.

Jesus said we are to love God and one another; that EVERYTHING hangs on those two commandments. Jesus was in the business of awakening hearts. This would be true regardless of one's religious persuasion or one's belief system. In Paul's words, you and I make up the body of Christ. And as we continue to touch others with love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, the Spirit of God will continue to tell the evolving Christian story through us.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest, scientist and modern mystic, said that the Christian is one who is connected through the heart to the whole of life, to all of God's creation. To bring the Spirit of Christ into the fullness of our time requires people to live in connectedness not in separation. We are called to live on the cusp of this evolutionary breakthrough. This requires us, the Body of Christ, to become Christ anew.

I invite you to reflect on that idea during your meditative practice this week. Please pray for wisdom to move our evolving Christian story forward in a world that so desperately needs the Christian message of hope and peace.