

“Our Choices Carry Costs”

Based on Psalm 85:8-13 and Mark 6:14-29 (NRSV)

Delivered on July 11 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Rev. John Nurnberger

Everyday we are faced with making choices. Some choices are relatively simple, like to choosing what to have for breakfast. Such choices come at little cost to ourselves or others. Some days we are faced with making more difficult or consequential choices, which do come at a cost. Such choices might involve a significant expenditure of money, a relationship or taking a stand on an issue. These kinds of choices require us to weigh the cost to ourselves or others. Mark's story about the death of John the Baptist is a study in the costs that come with decisions people make, costs that are borne either by themselves or others.

Mark mentions the arrest of John the Baptist almost in passing near the beginning of his gospel. John was arrested after he had baptized Jesus, perhaps during the forty days Jesus was tested out in the desert wilds, or shortly after Jesus emerged from that ordeal. It was only after John's arrest that Jesus began his public ministry. Later on Mark gives the backstory of John's arrest. Herod – this is not the Herod who governed when Jesus was born, but his son and successor – had a thing for his sister-in-law, Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Woody Allen famously said, “The heart wants what it wants.” Herod wanted – he just had to have – Herodias. Herod divorced his wife, who happened to be the daughter of a neighboring king, almost sparking a war. At the same time Herodias walked out on her husband. Herod and Herodias then married each other. I'm guessing there weren't any family holiday gatherings or birthday parties after that. John the Baptist had the temerity to publicly call out Herod and Herodias for their adulterous marriage. One can imagine Herodias nagging Herod to something – anything- to rid themselves of that troublesome prophet. Get him out of the public view. Silence him. So Herod had John bound in chains, and sent him to prison. Already we see costs that come with choices that people make, costs they themselves bear, or costs that are borne by others.

Herod decides to throw himself a lavish birthday party, inviting all the movers and shakers and A-listers in Galilee. Herodias's daughter, who the Jewish historian Josephus names Salome, entered the banquet hall and danced for the guests. Her age, which is not given, is a matter of speculation. Was she a child? Which would make this story creepier than it already is. Or a young woman. And her dance? Well, that's open to the imagination. What ever it was, she dazzled Herod and his guests. Herod was so pleased, he said to her, “Ask me for anything, anything at all, and I will give you what you want.” Carried away, he went on, “I swear, I'll split my kingdom with you, if you say so.” She went to consult with her mother about what she should ask for. Herodias saw her opportunity to get rid of her nemesis once and for all. Without batting an eyelash, Herodias told her daughter, “Ask for the head of John the Baptist.” Salome ran back to the king and said, “I want the head of John the Baptizer on a platter. And I want it now.” Herod, ensnared in a trap of his own making, can hardly refuse her. He has publicly made a promise. If he goes back on his promise, he will lose face. So he caved in and let her have her wish. In one sense, Herod has no choice. He has boxed himself in. In another chance he knows

the choice he has to make. He sends the executioner off to prison with orders to bring back John's head.

Herod, Herodias, Salome – all three make choices that come with significant costs. One wonders what their choices cost them. There is no wondering what their choices cost John. It cost him his life.

Is there any good news in this sordid story? And if so, what might it be? Perhaps this story teaches us something by way of negative example. I have a hazy recollection of an ad campaign based on negative example. It went something like this: So and so does this and that; don't be like so and so." Take Herod, for example. Herod was fascinated by John. I don't know if Herod went to visit John in prison, or had John brought to him. Either way, Herod enjoyed listening to John. When he did, he was wracked by guilt. He could not stay away from John; there was something about John that kept pulling him back. Maybe he was even looking for a way to let John go free and return to his ministry in the wilderness along the Jordan River. But then comes that moment when he must choose – between John and Salome. And choose right over wrong, humility over power, saving a life over saving face. This story serves as a cautionary tale.

Most of us will never face such a consequential decision, one that could cost another person their life. But there are questions we can ask ourselves when it comes to making choices. Do I care too much about what other people will think of me? Do I value my status or reputation more than I do the truth? Am I willing to allow people to bear the cost of my own convenience or comfort? These are challenging questions. But ones we should be willing to ask and wrestle with in our own lives.

If Herod teaches us by way of negative example, John the Baptist serves as a positive example. Like prophets before him, prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos and Micah, John risks speaking truth to power. He courageously speaks out against an injustice. John counted the cost of confronting the powers that be, and he was willing to pay the price for doing so. I think we are all familiar with the Hans Christian Andersen folktale "The Emperor's New Clothes." Two swindlers arrive at the capital city of an emperor who spends lavishly on clothing at the expense of state matters. Posing as weavers, they offer to supply him with magnificent clothes that are invisible to those who are stupid or incompetent. The emperor hires them, and they set up looms and go to work. A succession of officials, and then the emperor himself, visit them to check their progress. Each sees that the looms are empty but pretends otherwise to avoid being thought a fool. Finally, the weavers report that the emperor's suit is finished. They mime dressing him and he sets off in a procession before the whole city. The townsfolk uncomfortably go along with the pretense, not wanting to appear inept or stupid, until a child blurts out that the emperor is wearing nothing at all. The people then realize that everyone has been fooled. Although startled, the emperor continues the procession, walking more proudly than ever. Whatever fig leaf Herod used to justify his marriage to Herodias, John pulled it away, exposing their sordid affair. So what about us today? When someone tells a joke that demeans others or perpetuates a false stereotype, are we willing to speak up and say that is wrong? Are we willing

to risk ourselves in order to right a wrong? Jesus had some things to say about the cost of discipleship and willingness to lay one's life on the line for the sake of the gospel.

There is a cost to acting. And there is a cost to not acting. The cost to acting is one we bear. The cost of not acting is usually one others bear because of us.

Years ago I came across a prayer, written by a South African, that is in the form of a confession. The story of John's death brought it to mind.

You asked for my hands
that you might use them for your purpose.
I gave them for a moment but then withdrew them
for the work was so hard.

**You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice.
I gave you a whisper so that I might not be accused.**

You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty.
I closed them for I did not want to see.

**You asked for my life that you might work through me.
I gave a small part that I might not be too involved.**

Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you
only when it is convenient for me to do so,
only in the places where it is safe to do so,
only with those who make it easy to do so.

**Father, forgive me, renew me, send me out as a usable instrument
that I might take seriously the meaning of your cross.***

May it be so for you and for me.

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Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

Mark 6: 14-29 (NRSV) King *Herod* heard of it, 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.