

July 15 – Pentecost +8

Amos 7:7-15

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Amos+7%3A7-15&version=NRSV>

Ephesians 1:3-14

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1:1-14>

Mark 6:14-29

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%206:14-29;&version=NIV>

Last week we read about Ezekiel’s commission to proclaim God’s words to the Israelites, and a two-part story from the gospel. Jesus returns to His hometown of Nazareth, but they don’t respond as positively to Jesus as other neighbouring towns. It’s a surprising account, and Jesus goes on to commission His disciples as they begin their own ministry in nearby villages. As we unpacked these stories we considered the opportunity God extends to us to partner with God in God’s ministry and mission for the world. If we are willing, we too can be a vessel or instrument for God’s love and healing in our lives and in the lives of our neighbours. As disciples we aren’t going to reach each and every single person with our witness, but our actions can still be holy parts of a wider ministry and mission helping promote God’s activity in the world.

Our readings for today might not seem that similar to last week’s but I think there are some similarities beyond first glance. Our gospel reading takes place right where we left off last week, but it describes something much different, the events leading up to the beheading of John the Baptist. Although Jesus might not be that popular in Nazareth, His reputation is spreading throughout Israel, and King Herod hears about Him. People aren’t sure what to say about Jesus, whether He’s another prophet, whether He’s a mighty prophet like Elijah, or even the recently executed John the Baptist returned. And we hear what happened, the events that transpired from John being arrested, Herodias’ grudge, and Herod giving into Herodias’ daughter’s request.

Again, we have to place things in their context. We have to understand that all of these events are taking place in a society that is based, among other things, on honour and shame in a way that is quite different from today’s culture. Of course there were many things you could do to bring honour to you or your family, and likewise many things to bring shame and disgrace, but the honour/shame dynamic was much more entrenched. Receiving honour meant gaining status from others, while shame meant losing this status to others. Honour was the most valued currency, even more so than wealth. So when we see tax collectors being despised, it is they take are allied with their oppressors, take money from their own people and hoard it for themselves, they do not have honour even though they might have lots of wealth. Honour and shame had to be publicly acknowledged and transacted, so when we see the Pharisees accusing Jesus *in public* they’re actually trying to take away honour from Him and set themselves up as the honorable ones. So these public challenges represent this ‘zero-sum game’ – either the Pharisees are going to come out on top, or Jesus. Remember if we look back at last week’s readings, we see the people in Nazareth asking Jesus where He gets His authority from, isn’t this the carpenter, whose father isn’t really known? They’re questioning everything about Jesus in an attempt to make sure He doesn’t take their honour away from them, and leave them shameless.

So taking this dynamic into consideration, when we think about Herod promising Herodias’ daughter anything that she wants, up to half of his kingdom, remember he’s promising

this in public, at a banquet in front of tons of important people – high officials, military commanders, leading men in Galilee – a who's who of the inner circles. When the daughter replies with the head of John the Baptist on a platter, Herod has two choices: lose his honour – the most valuable thing he has, even more valuable than his money, and his entire kingdom perhaps – or, give in to the request and kill this man he knows to be righteous and holy. King Herod was greatly distressed, but because of his oath made in public – in front of his dinner guests – he didn't want to refuse her and risk being shamed. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head in order to keep his oath and preserve his honour.

Maybe learning more about this honour/shame dynamic is helpful, hopefully it at least enriches your understanding of this passage and whenever you read the New Testament, but let's take things in a different direction. Let's consider where Mark places this story. Right after Jesus is rejected at Nazareth, and sends His disciples out to begin their ministries. Why include the death of John the Baptist here?

Mark chose this place to hint at the political death that Jesus would die. Like John the Baptist, Jesus' life and mission are tightly connected with the society and culture in which they lived.¹ The social-political aspect, honour and shame, many different aspects of the first century world in Israel and the Roman Empire. Mark places this account of John the Baptist between the commission and the return of the disciples to hint at its significance for Jesus' mission and its growth.²

Mark uses the story of John the Baptist as an opportunity to present a transition in Jesus' ministry. This gospel is not just about the wonderful things Jesus says and does, but it's about Jesus inviting His disciples to join Him, to participate in His ministry, because He is about to do something that will change the world forever, and turn it on its head.

While Herod kept his honour intact, remember that someone would have to suffer shame. For John the Baptist it would seem that he could not have died a more humiliating and disgraceful death. As one scholar points out: "to die in battle at the hands of enemy soldiers is honorable. To be executed or to die at the hands of a woman is a mark of shame."³ We understand the cross to be a painful death, but it's also much more than that, it's humiliation, it's shame, dying a death reserved for the worst of criminals. How could anyone ever claim to have honour from dying such a death? How could followers proclaim a message of hope, love, and grace, when their leader has died a shameful death?

It doesn't make sense...by human standards. But that's part of the amazing, even confounding, way that God is involved in the world. Jesus lived as a member of society that was based on honour and shame, where Israel was occupied by the Romans; but we also have to remember that God is over and above all of these systems and governments. God transcends human institutions, and it's essential to remember who's really in charge. Not the person with the most money or the most honour, not King Herod, or some other monarch, or any political leader, but God! God is the one who is worthy of our love and attention. God who loves the world so much that God entered into it in the form as one of us to communicate with us in a way that we

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1325 Powery

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

could better understand. And also invites us into holy work, this mission and ministry for all people.

Much of Mark's gospel centers on Jesus' determination to free people from the forces that rob of abundant life: whether it's disease, isolation, discrimination, and even death. Jesus comes and, in compassion for the needs of the world and the needs of people, Jesus responds to all those who ask.⁴ But we know that as Christ's followers we are invited into this ministry as well. To respond in compassion to the needs of the world and the people around us. Again, like Ezekiel we may not have been commissioned in the exact same way but perhaps we are similar in the sense that we are called to be God's mouth, and hands, and eyes, God's partners in ministry. Or like Amos from today's reading, we can say we're no prophets, we don't even have an ancestor who was a prophet, but I'm a common person who the Lord invited to be part of God's ministry today.

We still live as members of a society that values certain things and not others, but let's keep the big picture in mind and who's in charge. Many times we might see our involvement in God's ministry aligning with cultural values like helping those in need, supporting charitable causes, but we have to keep in mind those other times when our discipleship requires going against the current and having the courage to do so. Who are the ones in need of compassion? Who are the vulnerable people around us? How can we embody Jesus' ministry and respond?

Again this week we have an invitation to partner with God in ministry, to bear witness in ways that make God's ministry of wholeness and love real in this world that God created and loves so much.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/07/pentecost-8-b-two-stories-two-truths/>