

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller
12 July 2015

Scripture readings:

2nd Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 Psalm 24 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:14-29

I have often wondered why the lessons for some Sundays were chosen. I can't figure out what the first lesson has to do with the Gospel lesson today except I wonder whether or not David dropped his ephod in the dance. *[Laughter]* Apparently he only had one. Somebody else allegedly had seven ephods or veils. I find the story of the beheading of John the baptizer intriguing. An exposition on this text is Richard Strauss' opera *Salome*. It's only one act. How many acts do you need for incest, violence, nudity, sin, death, perversion? You know, one act's enough.

The text for Strauss' opera was written by Oscar Wilde who was willing to expand the biblical text a little bit to explore characters, and I think he did a wonderful job of inviting us in his *libretto* and Strauss in his opera to consider ourselves and how we see ourselves and what we think about this text when we hear it and see the production of that opera.

Herod is a Tetrarch who without much exercise represents temporal authority. He's wealthy, he's arrogant, he's greedy, he's driven by his personal and fleshly passions, he gets what he wants, he wears silver clothes. He married his brother's wife. That wasn't a bad thing if your brother was dead because in Jewish Law you were supposed to marry your brother's wife and continue to produce progeny. But not when he was still living. Apparently they don't have a very good relationship either - Herod and Herodias - and they disagree on a lot of things. One of the major things they disagree on is whether or not John the Baptist should live. And then of course in the story comes this extraordinarily provocative dance of increasing nudity known popularly as the dance of the seven veils. After begging and pleading and begging and pleading with - it is Oscar Wilde who gives Salome her name, not scriptures - pleading with her to dance, she agrees to do it and then she backs him into a corner. She gets him to swear an oath. She screams at him, "*You have sworn an oath!*" And then she slinks around and she says, "*Well, I want something on a silver platter.*"

Well, he's offered her half of his kingdom. Half a kingdom is not going to fit on a plate so he's getting pretty excited at this point. "*What do you want?*" "*I want the head of John the Baptist!*" "*No, you can't have that!*" And then he starts to offer her things that are important to him: the crown jewels, the largest emerald in the world, the fieriest opals, all kinds of jewels and gems that have funny names. You think the words in the first lesson are hard to pronounce? Try some of the jewels like *chrysoprases*. She doesn't want any of it, and that really ticks off Herod because he says, "*You're your mother's daughter. You're listening to your old lady. She's putting you up to this because she has an ax to grind.*" John has told her that her marriage is, if not valid, certainly illicit, morally corrupt. She's afraid of him. But somehow here's Herod, this extraordinarily crooked, filthy, greedy, slimy, dirty man who is fascinated by John the Baptist who isn't apparently by his appearance a preppy either. He doesn't dress at Brooks Brothers - John the Baptist. He wears funny clothes, he eats funny things.

But Herod isn't the only one fascinated with him. Salome goes to the cistern - this is in the opera - where he is held as prisoner, and she says to the guards, "*I want to see him. I want to look at this guy.*" They say, "*Oh no! We have strict orders from Herod not to let anyone talk to him or see him.*" And she insists and insists and insists and of course she get to see John the Baptist, and then she uses every feminine wile in the world - and this is before she drops **her** ephod - to attract the attention of the baptizer. She tells him how beautiful his ivory body is - and an ivory colored body in the Middle East is probably attractive. She makes her advances, and he tells her she'd better not touch him. And then she turns around and says, "*I don't like your body anyway. It's ugly.*" She says, "*You have the most beautiful black hair in the world.*" She wants to run her fingers through his hair and she talks about how it hangs in luscious curls over his shoulder like bunches of grapes. She tells him how gorgeous he is, and he says, "*Don't you dare touch me.*" "*I don't like your hair anyway. It's ugly. It's dirty. It's dusty.*"

Then she tells him how beautiful his red lips are. I may be wrong but I don't think John the baptizer used lipstick. Apparently his lips were beautiful and red and luscious and juicy. She goes through all of this language and tells him

how much she wants to kiss him, and of course he'll have none of it. This is a holy man who is keeping himself pure, who is obeying the Law, who understands that his special relationship with God has to do with the way he takes care of himself morally, how he keeps himself clean and pure ritually and physically, and he understands how much more God loves him than Salome or Herod or Herodias or the rest of the troop there keeping him captive. He understands that he is a good and holy man. The rest of them don't get it, but Herod has a sense of that. Herod sort of gets that. Herod is attracted, intrigued, and fascinated by him and, therefore, is to a degree afraid of him. And when Salome, at her mother's encouragement or not, wants on this gorgeous silver plate the head of John the baptizer, he absolutely does not want to give it to her because he says, "*He is a man who has been touched by God. He is a holy man. You can't do that. That will certainly bring the whole shooting match down. Let me give you wealth instead. Let me give you diamonds, jewels, necklaces, bracelets. Let me give you everything in the world you can possibly imagine. I have it all!*"

The joke of that is of course that Herod is a Tetrarch. Do you know what a Tetrarch is? In the Roman region that was under the Roman Empire a Tetrarch was one of four leaders, not the only one. They divided the territory into four parts so he was a ruler but only of a quarter, not the whole thing. So he didn't have all that much to offer her, but he knew she had less than he did and he tries to invite her to be as greedy and have as poor sense of values as he did. "*Let me buy this off of you.*"

She wants none of it. That's not where her head is at the moment. And whether or not Salome as her mother's daughter or Salome as this very sexy, very sex-driven, very sex-obsessed person who she's come to be by this time in the 21st century, wants the head of John the Baptist for herself or for her mother doesn't really matter. In the end because he is a good, honest, law-abiding citizen, Herod agrees because he has sworn an oath, and against his own better judgment, against his desire, his will, his own gut, he permits John to be beheaded and she gets the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter.

And then the part that Oscar Wilde brings to this tale is she makes love to his head. She kisses it, she tastes the blood, she runs her fingers through his hair. She defiles - she thinks - this dead man's head. And *her* behavior becomes so reprehensible to the other reprehensible characters in this story that Herod himself becomes disgusted, and he screams to his guards, "*Kill that damn woman!*" And they rush on her with their shields and crush her to death. I added the "damn." [*Laughter*]

Why do we bother to think about this story? There are two comparisons beyond David dancing and dropping his ephod and Salome dancing and dropping her veil - two comparisons I invite you to think about this morning. One is the comparison between John the baptizer and his cousin who is also a bit of a crackpot and weirdo. Anybody know who that was? Jesus! You remember before he was born when Mary and her cousin Elizabeth met each other, scripture tells us the infants in their wombs leapt. Renaissance painters do a wonderful job with this. They sort of do in utero cutaways of Mary and Elizabeth looking at each other and you see these little babies sort of in kangaroo pouches waving at each other. [*Laughter*] There's another marvelous northern European painting in the Cloisters in New York of the visitation when Mary and Elizabeth in advanced pregnancy are visiting each other and it's quite beautiful. Each one has her hand on the abdomen of the other. But the thing I like about that painting is it shows us what medieval maternity clothes look like because Elizabeth's dress is slit down the side and it's just laced together so the larger she got you just open the laces and it would expand. In the Renaissance you get the tondo paintings of Jesus and his cousin John the baptizer as infants with Mary and all the rest - coo, coo, coo, Johnson and Johnson baby powder pictures of the Baby Jesus and John the Baptist. And they both grow up to be relative kooks and outside of the norm of society.

I think this text points us to a comparison that makes the one thing that makes them different profoundly different. John the baptizer understands his holiness, his relationship with God to mean that he is out of touch literally and figuratively with sin and sinners. His object and his goal is to keep himself undefiled, and he does that by excluding himself from being touched and by passing judgment. "*Daughter of Babylon,*" he calls her. "*You filthy slut.*" Well, he produces a decent message: "*Repent and be saved. The end of the world is coming.*" We're still waiting. But it depends on how you calculate that. "*Straighten up your act and fly right. Do it my way. Make yourself as holy as I am. Obey my*

rules and you'll be better because my rules are God's rules. I'm pure and clean. Look at me. Don't you want to be just like me? Don't you want to be religious and holy?" And they cut off his head!

His cousin Jesus maybe dressed a little bit better but certainly not at Brooks Brothers and maybe ate a little bit differently - not locusts and honey - but maybe not much better. His cousin Jesus, his age-mate Jesus, is also a religious man but the story about Jesus and Jesus' holiness is very different. How many weeks ago was it we read the story where Jesus said, "*Who touched me?*" Now Jesus was in the middle of a crowd of people. They were all jostling him. But he wanted to know who touched him faithfully. Who took power from him? "*Who was healed by me?*"

Did you see the pope's arrival at the conference he attended in Paraguay yesterday? I couldn't believe it. There were no ropes, there was no pathway, there *was* a red carpet, but thousands of photographers and ordinary people pushing up against the pontiff. He could hardly get through. I'm sure there was a bodyguard there but it was one of these things - he was being touched! And people were happy to touch him. His presence was invigorating and exciting to them. And all of the stories that we have about Jesus are that Jesus was with the people that John the Baptist refused to be with. Jesus lived in the cities. He went to the country occasionally for a retreat. Jesus spent much of his time in the city with people who were unacceptable to most of the rest of the religious community. He visited, touched and loved sluts and whores. He visited and ate with tax collectors, sinners. He went to the powerful crooked politicians of the day. He was willing to talk with and be with valueless women. He saw value in children. "*Let them come to me!*" How could children have come to Jesus without him picking them up, putting them on his lap and him putting his hand on their heads and running his fingers through their hair. Everything about Jesus has something to do with being *with* people, touching them and being touched by them. And Jesus has none of this sense of ritual purity or of his religious behavior and his relationship with God being related to him keeping himself pure and clean. Who is it gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan? That parable isn't about the guy who is nice to the guy who is knocked on the head. That parable is about the people who didn't do anything for him because they were keeping themselves ritually clean. They couldn't help him or they would not have been religious. They couldn't have touched him and gone to the temple and offered sacrifice. They couldn't have helped him and kept God happy at the same time!

Jesus comes and says, "*That message is fakakta! That's nuts.*" The other word is *fakakta* which is Yiddish. I think it's permissible in sermons. [*Laughter*] Jesus takes this entire theological system of Law and obedience to the Law as one's justification before an angry God and says, "*Unh-uh. Unh-uh.*"

Now Herod gets it because the last example, the last thing that we hear about Herod in this Gospel lesson is Herod is going to obey the oath he made - now get this - even though it's against his gut, his best judgment because he swore an oath. He was going to do what she asked even though it was incorrect, immoral and against his will and his gut. He was going to have that man's head cut off because he understood that obedience to the Law makes God happy with you. And if he wasn't worried about God, the scripture is very clear he was worried about public opinion. That's pretty much the same when you're godless, isn't it? Public opinion becomes your god when you're worried about what they will say.

So instead of saying, as he might have, "*I was wrong. I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I have to break my promise to you. I'm not going to have him killed,*" he said, "*I made a promise. That's the rule. I have to do it even though it's wrong.*" That's the point I think Jesus was trying to make in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It wasn't about the nice guy, the Samaritan. The real story was about people who were doing wrong things because they were religious things to do. So Jesus comes as the cousin of John the baptizer who's got this religious system straight on and says, "*Unh-uh.*" This is about our relating to each other as human beings and about God's will and desire to live in this world and be in touch with and to touch us who are by nature sinful and unclean. And although we don't think we would do the same as Herod and Herodias and Salome would do, that's simply because we're hypocrites and we don't deal frankly enough with our personalities and our interior selves. That's 19th century psychology. It's all there in each of us.

The message of the Gospel that Jesus brings in the end is as costly to Jesus as it was to John the Baptist. They

both were executed for what they believed. And I suppose they both stand as options for us today. What kind of religious choices will we make? What will our religion look like? Will we look like disciples of John the baptizer, people who are actively and seriously in the business of keeping ourselves ritually, culturally, culticly and by our understanding morally pure in an impure world? I think that leads to the kind of current theology - *"It's just you and me, Jesus, against the rest of the god-damned world."* One option. But the option of John's cousin is the option of God's grace, the option of believing that the almighty and loving Creator chooses to live close enough to us that we can jostle God, we can touch God, even perhaps inappropriately - get this - grope God and be touched and groped by God and be in our physical being and all of our complexities as sinful human beings by nature also be those who believe that God desires - despite our unworthiness - to live with us and be with us and join us on our journeys even though we are cruddy and filthy and dirty and sinful and undeserving and hell-bound. Jesus says, *"All of that notwithstanding, I come to you to give you this message: God is with you."* God is touchable, God is kissable, and God loves you. *God loves you!* He didn't say anything about us loving God.

And I suppose, friends, if we ever get to the point where we believe that we are that much loved by God despite our lack of deserving that that might make a difference in our lives and in our religion. The lessons today indicate that there is more than one religious choice in terms of who our leaders and leadership will be, and they both look pretty authentic and they both have a great deal of respect and speak with a great deal of authority, but in the end the choice is ours. Which cousin will be our Lord?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.