

“Applying God’s Word”

Mark 6:14-29

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2021; July 11, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The word of God tells us the story of John the Baptist today. Specifically, it tells us about how he applied the word of God to the situation involving King Herod and Herodias. It also tells us about how he died, being faithful to God’s word.

Let’s follow the story.

Let’s first confirm who this King Herod was. He was not the King Herod who we meet in the context of Jesus’ birth. In connection with Jesus’ birth, there were wisemen who came from the east to Jerusalem. They were seeking the newly born King of the Jews, the Messiah, so they could worship Him. They came to Jerusalem to ask King Herod where the Messiah was.

History refers to that King Herod as Herod the Great. It was Herod the Great whom the wise men met. It was also Herod the Great who tried to get rid of Jesus as the newly born Messiah. In trying to do so, he ordered that all the male babies two years old or younger, that were in the vicinity of Bethlehem at that time, should be killed. You can see what kind of a household, with what kind of moral standards, the King Herod of our story grew up in.

The King Herod of our story was one of the sons of Herod the Great. So we could call him Herod Junior. We will just call him Herod. One of the other sons of Herod the Great was Philipp, Herod’s brother, who is mentioned in the story.

Jesus’s fame was spreading. Herod heard about him. His guilty conscience began to haunt him as he was wondering who Jesus was. For he was thinking that John, whom he had beheaded, had been raised from the dead and was doing the things that Jesus was doing.

Herod had married a woman named Herodias. The trouble is that she was already married to Philipp, Herod’s brother. Now maybe Philipp had died, or Philipp and Herodias had been lawfully divorced. But that is not the case. If it had been the case, then what John the Baptist said to Herod and Herodias would not have made any sense.

Herod had a guilty conscience because of what he had done to John. As the preacher of God’s word, John had told Herod that it was not lawful for him to be married to Philipp’s wife (Mark 6:18). That is not what Herodias wanted to hear. She got upset and held a grudge against John (Mark 6:19). So Herod arrested John and had him thrown in prison to appease Herodias (Mark 6:17). Yet, Herod was afraid of John, because he knew that John was a righteous and holy man (Mark 6:20).

People often act against their better judgment.

Herodias had developed hatred toward John and wanted to get rid of him, by having him put to death. But Herod protected John.

Then Herod’s birthday came. He threw a party. He invited the important people of Galilee: the nobles and the military commanders and the prominent citizens (Mark 6:21). They were all there eating and drinking and making merry and having a good time.

Herodias had a daughter by her marriage to Philipp. She was also Herod’s niece. She is now also Herod’s step-daughter, because Herod had also married Herodias. She danced for Herod and his guests at the party. Her dancing pleased them. So Herod vowed to give her anything she wanted, even up to half his kingdom (Mark 6:23).

What a fool Herod was. He was being moved by passions and feelings he should not have

had. He was probably also a little tipsy. He was also filled with the vain glory of being “king” in his great Father’s place and having all of these important people at his party, hanging on his every word. So he made that foolish oath to Herodias’s daughter.

Really Herod? You swore to give her up to half your kingdom just because she danced for you and your guests and made you feel good? He was certainly not thinking straight; he wasn’t thinking at all. But that’s what he did.

The girl didn’t know what to ask for so she asked her mother. Now the opportunity Herodias was dying for presented itself. Now she could fulfill her hatred of John and get her revenge on him. She told her daughter to ask for John’s head on a platter (Mark 6:24).

Herod was grieved because of that request. But because of his oath and his guests, he did not want to refuse the girl. He granted her request. He gave orders to the executioner to behead John in prison (Mark 6:27). That’s what happened.

It is amazing how cheap the prophet’s life was to Herod and Herodias.

That’s the story. One of the important points we can glean from it has to do with what John said to Herod and Herodias as the preacher of the word of the God. He said: “It is not lawful” (Mark 6:18). “Herod, I know you think you are king and all, but it is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”

What kind of word was this that the minister of God’s word spoke? Was it law or Gospel? It was the law. It is not lawful, John said.

Why did he do that? He did that because he had to understand what question the situation was presenting, and then apply the word of God that speaks to that question. He did that because the question that was being presented to John could only be answered from the law.

So here we learn something important about the application of God’s word. God’s word is responsive to the question being raised by a particular situation. It is not that the word of God speaks only with one voice, the voice of the Gospel.

John was being confronted with the situation of Herod marrying his brother’s wife, while his brother was still alive. So what was he going to say to that, as a preacher of God’s word? “Oh, it’s okay. God forgives you and loves you, and affirms you, and blesses whatever it is you want to do, even your creative arrangement with respect to marriage and human sexuality.”

No. John did not do that because the question being presented to him did not call forth the application of the Gospel but the law.

Was John the Baptist in the wrong in doing so? Certainly, it wasn’t what Herodias wanted to hear. Should the application of the word of God be decided on the basis of what Herodias wanted to hear? We have to say no, or there would no longer be any word of God. There would only be public opinion.

Maybe John was mistaken with respect to the substance of the situation? In other words, maybe it was just not true that it was not lawful for Herod to have married his brother’s wife? But that’s not the case either. The word of God about marriage and human sexuality is known. It is written in God’s word. That is the truth of the matter, for whatever God does is true; whatever God tells us in His word is true. And we love the truth, because we have the Spirit of Truth, which also loves the truth.

This teaches us that when the situation or the question that presents itself calls for an answer from God’s law, then that is the answer that we should expect from the application of God’s word, and that is the answer which we should love and embrace as God’s people. It is not the case that the answer from God’s word to every situation is the Gospel, though the Gospel is always not far away. If it were, then the Gospel would be the license for lawlessness. If it were,

then the law or any truth from God's word that is not the Gospel, would have no application to our lives.

There is a point of view that holds that the Law has no application to our lives on account of the Gospel. It is something that we have called antinomianism in our Lutheran tradition. Antinomianism means that the law has no application. Antinomianism is a huge problem in our culture today. For our culture says that the answer to every moral question is "love," particularly in the area of sexual morality.

But the story of what John the Baptist said to Herod and Herodias does not embrace antinomianism. The Christian faith does not embrace lawlessness, and the word of God is not reduced to the Gospel alone. The law has a very important role to play in our lives. It teaches us truth. It calls us to repentance. It teaches us how to live in a way that is pleasing to God, which is something faith always wants to do. So we embrace it as the truth, just as the Gospel is the truth.

We do so because we embrace God as our God, who has redeemed us in Christ at great cost to Him and called us His dearly loved children. As dearly loved children of God, we are given His Spirit which teaches us in our hearts to love the truth, whatever that truth may be, according to God's word. And the Spirit strengthens us to walk in the truth, just as it teaches us to love the Gospel of God's grace and mercy to us in Jesus the Christ.

Finally, we also see in the story of John the Baptist that the love of the truth can involve suffering for it. This is because the world in which we live does not like to hear it, whether it is the law or the Gospel. But as John spoke the truth of God's word to power, so to speak, which cost him much suffering, and ultimately martyrdom, so we too as God's people must not turn away from speaking the truth in faithfulness to God and His word, as the question requires, whether law or Gospel. May He strengthen us by His Spirit so to do. Amen.