

**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)** The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson  
 Mark 6:14-29 Gloria Dei Lutheran Church  
 July 15, 2018 Wichita, Kansas

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

Reading today's Gospel this past week brought to mind one of my favorite Broadway musicals, *Sunset Boulevard*. If you've seen it — or the movie upon which it's based — you know it's about an aging has-been silent-film star, Norma Desmond, who dreams of making a comeback. And in her effort to stage this comeback, Norma writes a screenplay about the beheading of John the Baptist, but she makes some significant plot changes from what the scriptures tell us.

In her script, King Herod's step-daughter is in love with John, and of course she wants him to love her back. But John the Baptist is a holy man; he's pledged to celibacy, and he cannot return her love. And so the step-daughter determines that she will *make* John her own — one way or another. If she can't have him *living*, then she'll have him *dead*.

With her cunning and her sex appeal, she then manipulates Herod into granting her whatever she desires. And when the king acquiesces, she asks him for John's head on a platter. If the man she loves won't love her back, then she won't let anyone else enjoy his affections either. Norma Desmond's version of this story is *moving* and it is *romantic*. It contains all those elements which many people expect in a good story: unrequited love, seduction, intrigue, power and violence.

But of course, the scriptural version from St. Mark's Gospel isn't nearly so romantic — at least in regards to John. In today's Gospel, we simply read that John the Baptist was in prison because he had offended the king's wife, Herodias. It seems that a few years before, King Herod had been visiting his half-brother Philip who was then married to Herodias. Herod became smitten with his brother's wife, and even though he was already married, and even though Herodias was married too, Herod began an affair with her. Eventually Herod divorced his own wife, and he arranged for Herodias to be divorced from Philip, so that the two of them could then be married.

Enter John the Baptist, who publicly preached against this adultery of Herod and Herodias. John was preparing the way for the Messiah; and so he was calling people to *repent*. He was calling people to *turn from their sin*, and make ready the way of the Lord. And John had apparently been very clear with King Herod about the fact that what he and Herodias had done was sinful. Their actions were not pleasing in the sight of the God.

Now, like most people, Herodias didn't like to be confronted with her sin. But *un*-like most people, she had the *power* and the *influence* to get rid of the person who was troubling her — to get rid of the person who was confronting her with her sin. And so, she arranged for John the Baptist to be executed.

St. John the Baptist, was a *righteous* man. He had been a *faithful servant* of the Lord, boldly bearing witness to the coming Messiah, and heralding the coming kingdom of God. And for his righteousness, he was *martyred*. For his faithfulness, John was rewarded with *execution*.

In a graphic way then, John the Baptist was truly the forerunner of Christ Jesus. *First* of all, because he called on people to prepare for the Messiah's coming and pointed people to Jesus. But *secondly*, John was the forerunner of Christ, because *he was executed for his faithfulness to God*. John the Baptist's beheading carries with it the *foreboding intimation* that Jesus too will eventually face death as a consequence of his ministry.

And beyond that, John the Baptist also serves as a *ominous prototype* for all of those who would seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus. John is the model for you and me to follow. Because he was *faithful*, to the *point of death*. John did not turn away from speaking the truth, *even when the truth made him enemies*. John did not shy away from being a faithful witness to God, even when he was faced with losing his own life.

And that is of course exactly what Christ Jesus calls *all of his disciples to do*. It is what he calls *each of you* to do.

Indeed, Jesus himself declared:

*If any man would come after me,*

*let him **deny himself***

*and take up his cross and follow me.*

*For whoever would save his life will lose it;*

*and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it.*

(Mk 8:34-5)

Following Jesus — being his disciple — *will mean* the *death* of you. For many Christians of course, it has *literally* meant death. From the first Christian martyr Stephen, right up to the those in lands like Iraq, Somalia and Pakistan, there have been, and there still are, Christians who put their very lives on the line when they confess the name of Jesus Christ. That is especially true in some lands for Muslims who become Christians.

But even for those of us who do not face *physical* death, as a consequence of our Christian faith, we are none-the-less sure to face a *spiritual death*. Because following Jesus necessitates the *death of that old sinful being* in you. Following Jesus demands the *death of all of your old priorities*, and it replaces them with *one new priority: faithfulness to Christ*. This one new focus on Christ then, means the end of all of your old *self-centered* ways, and insists on *putting to death anything which is contrary to God's will*.

So being a disciple of Christ is truly a call to *martyrdom*. And it changes *every* aspect of your life. Being a disciple of Jesus changes how you use your *wealth* and worldly resources. Being a disciple of Jesus changes how you use

your *time*. Being a disciple of Jesus changes how you *relate to God*. Being a disciple of Jesus changes how you *relate to your neighbors*.

In this country especially, we are often misled into thinking that religion — Christianity included — is merely a private matter, that it has to do with your relationship with God, but not with your relationships with others.

That kind of thinking is simply *misguided* and *false*.

For faith in Jesus Christ, first of all connects you to Christ's Body — the Church. And then it drives you out into the world. It *drives you out* to serve the neighbor, for Christ's sake. And there is *nothing private* about that.

In his Small Catechism explanation to the Ten Commandments, Luther repeatedly drives home the positive obligation that we Christians have to care for the neighbor. We are to "*help them in all their physical needs.*" We are to "*help them to improve and protect their property and means of making a living.*" We are to "*defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest way.*" And so on.

In short, out of faithfulness to Jesus, you are called to lay down your lives, for the sake of your neighbor. Without a doubt, following Jesus puts to death that old person who could turn a blind eye to the misfortune and suffering of someone else.

Now this call to martyrdom, this call to take up your cross and follow Christ is of course, not always easy to heed. After all, we don't like giving up our old ways; and it's painful to experience the death of the sinner in us. But of course, that is finally the only way we can experience new life in Christ. And that is the only way we can experience truly *abundant* and *eternal* life.

Someone once asked the psychiatrist Karl Menninger his advice for a person suffering from depression. And interestingly enough, instead of saying, "*Well, that person should consult a psychiatrist,*" Dr. Menninger surprised his audience by answering:

*[If you are depressed,]*

*Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks,*

***find someone in need,***

*and **do something** to help that person.*

***Find someone in need, and do something to help that person.***

Dr. Menninger expressed at a psychological level that which is even more true at a *spiritual* level. For when you let go of your life for the sake of someone else — for the sake of Christ — then you do indeed experience *joy, fulfillment, and authentic life*.

Today we rightly give thanks for the life and witness of John the Baptist, and countless Christian men and women, witnesses and martyrs, through the ages. By their model and example, we see the truth that true life is indeed found when

you let go of *your life*, for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of your neighbor.

May God grant you the faith to boldly follow where John the Baptist led the way. So that by *your witness* — by *your martyrdom* — you might — like John — faithfully point others to the new life in Jesus Christ.

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