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## There is always a choice

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given July 11, 2021*

*Mark 6:7-29*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. Amen.

My brother Steve and I are both preachers. I remember talking with him about today's particularly strange and even gruesome gospel story, when John the Baptist is beheaded by King Herod at a dinner party. My brother said to me that as long as we all understand the Bible as just the ancient equivalent of Game of Thrones, we'll be fine.

What *are* we to make of this difficult story? As I looked at it again to prepare for this homily, two things stood out. This story is about times when as human beings we feel we don't have a choice, and so we do things we know in our hearts are not right. Second, this story shows what it is like to have courage to tell the truth, and what impact that has on the wider world. When have you experienced either of those two things? Times you felt backed into a corner, perhaps even of your own making, and ended up doing what you knew was wrong? Conversely, when have you experienced telling the truth in love, or doing the right thing, when it was risky to do so? What happened within you and in the world around you?

Herod was the Jewish king at the time of Jesus, under the dominance of the Roman Empire. He was known historically as a vicious and cruel person. He had taken his brother's wife as mistress, and obviously found his own stepdaughter attractive enough to parade her in front of his dinner guests. In his arrogant and extravagant offer to give her whatever she wanted, which turned out to be the head of John the Baptist, Herod was caught in the sordid web of his own weaving. The story says he did not want to kill John. But I imagine he thought he did not have much of a choice. He would sacrifice his reputation, and greatly lose face, if he didn't. So, he did what he knew in his heart to be wrong.

Who *was* responsible for John being beheaded? Was it the soldier who did the deed, or reckless Herod who didn't intend this particular outcome but didn't shy away from it either, or his stepdaughter who made the request, or his wife who told her to ask for John's head, or even the guests who didn't step in to say stop? Whose responsibility is it when immigrant children are separated from their parents in our nation today—at the border, or through deportation here in Minnesota, sometimes after years of living and paying taxes here? Is it the border guard, or ICE, the Congress who made the laws, or the voters with our priorities and fears? Whose responsibility is it when mistakes are made in our own lives? Our culture spends a lot of time assigning blame, usually conveniently across partisan lines, even though we all know that the line between good and evil is not in fact the political aisle, but right within each of our hearts. But in face of injustices like these and the tendency to assign blame, what I believe we need is the meaning and reality of the word “gospel,” which is good news.

And the good news is always about how God meets us in everyday life, empowering us with love and forgiveness, and helps us make different choices in the small things, which in the end train us to make different choices in the big things. It's always about the radical healing and liberation that pours out of Jesus when human beings live fully into God's love and forgiveness. Now, it's true that this story doesn't end with Herod's repentance, or with raising John the Baptist from the dead. What does happen is that after John's murder, Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two, to preach repentance and forgiveness to everyday people, which he called good news. He sends them out to heal the sick and liberate those in bondage to evil. Jesus knew that through the good news of God's love and forgiveness, people can change. When we receive the love and healing of God, we are liberated to see choices we couldn't even imagine without them. John had experienced this; he was so passionate about the kingdom of God he saw that he could not stop teaching and preaching and baptizing, and even speaking truth to power. It got him killed, but he started a movement that prepared the people for Jesus. And we are still telling his story today.

John and Jesus were teaching the world that they did not need to see the world only in terms of Herod and Rome, a world where might makes right, a world in which only what the powerful do makes any difference. Instead, they could begin to see a world where the kingdom of God truly exists. Where we can see and enact creative choices that make a new reality. We can do the right thing, even if it costs us, even if it's risky, because what one person does matters. They, and we, need to learn that we always have a choice, all the power of empire notwithstanding.

So the soap operas of the Bible and the world continue on, ferociously. The prophets of this world do get beheaded, in biblical times and now. What is our responsibility in face of all that happens in today's world?

We can remember to see beyond empire, to the whole truth that God's love and forgiveness make possible what previously had been impossible. That trusting in God's love, we can make creative choices that run counter to the prevailing narrative. If we had been guests at Herod's party, what could we have done to invite Herod to a better way? To do this, we need not assign blame. We can fearlessly accept that each of us is responsible for our part. And then we can turn from that which does not work anymore and walk a different way—the Way of Love. As John did, and Jesus did. As we can do.

And that is how we become willing to take risks for the sake of compassion, both personally and in the broader world. We can choose not to play games that don't work anymore, from the humble and joyful belief that things can be better than they are now. That the love of Christ can change us; and through us, can change the world.

One way we might exercise the belief that things can be better, and to see that we do have a choice, is in the conversation our church has been having about joining the sanctuary state movement in Minnesota. We're talking about this because our immigration system has been deeply steeped in the systemic racism that impacts everything in our nation. And as you know, last year St. John's discerned that the Holy Spirit was calling us to center the work of racial justice and healing as followers of Jesus' Way of Love. We know that God commands God's people, again and again in scripture, to care for the stranger and the poor.

Our Bishop, the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, and many other faith communities have formed an interfaith coalition advocating that Minnesota become a sanctuary state, and St. John's is considering whether to join that coalition. This would mean one specific and narrow thing: that we'd be lending our moral support to those advocating for a change in Minnesota law, that state congress would limit ICE's ability to use state resources, personnel or information to detain and deport people. We can see that the way we've been playing the immigration game has not been working. We can see that children have been and are still being separated from their parents at the border and in our own state through deportation. So, what does God call us to do? How might we creatively recognize the choices before us, and have the courage to discern what is right?

Many of you have expressed unequivocal support for this, because as one of you said, "this is who we are"; others have referred to what our Bishop said, which is that one of the clearest moral imperatives in our scripture is to care for the stranger and the outcast. Some of you have felt uneasy that this might be too political, too divisive. Some of you have felt this is overbroad; that ICE is law enforcement with a legitimate role, which ought to be able to use state resources in its work.

What I would invite us to do is to step back and again steep in the good news of God in Christ—that Christ loves all people, including you. That because of God's Realm, things do not have to be the way they are. There is always a choice. Let us consider our immigrant siblings in Christ in the Twin Cities—Liberian Episcopalians at St. Andrews in North Minneapolis, Mexican and Latino Episcopalians at St. Nicholas in Richfield, Hmong and KaRen Episcopalians at Holy Apostles and Messiah in St. Paul, all of whom are directly impacted

by our immigration laws and practices. The answer is not to throw up our hands and say that we can do nothing. The answer involves asking, in this situation, what does love look like? How can we discern the Spirit's leading? Regardless of how you have *been* thinking about this, let's focus on this question: how can we creatively be faithful to whom we know God to be, and to Jesus' Way of Love? There is always a creative third way. There is always a way that leads to life. What is God asking of us?

This choice is only one example of many issues that we face all the time—both broader systemic issues and personal ones. When you feel stuck or hopeless on this or anything else, you can breathe and know that there is always a choice. No one can make you choose that which violates the image of God within you. We can choose creative, countercultural actions because we know that things really can be better than they are now. We are called here to this assembly, week after week, to be broken open, forgiven, healed, nourished, blessed, and then sent out again, with nothing but God's love to defend us, nothing but God's love to offer. Because that love changes the world. And that is good news. Amen.