

**"THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP."
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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden
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Texts for the Sermon: Mark 6:14-29

Introduction.

As we turn to this text let me remind you that we are once again in one of those literary sandwiches Mark is known for. Our text is the meat fit in between two slices of bread. The bread was Jesus sending out the twelve apostles in verses 7-13 and verse 30 when the apostles came back and told Jesus all they had done and taught.

Inserted into the middle of that story is this story about the death of John the Baptist. As we consider it together one of our questions is why Mark interrupted his other story to insert this story, what's the connection?

Mark 6:14-29.

You've heard the line, you can't tell the players without a scorecard, well we need one here. Let's try to get the actors straight in this soup opera world of the Herods.

Herod the Great was the murderous tyrant who was king when Jesus was born and who tried to kill Jesus in Bethlehem. Herod the Great had a bunch of wives. One of them gave birth to Herod Antipas, who became the ruler of Galilee. This is Herod Antipas, also known as Herod the tetrarch. Another wife gave birth to Herod Philip who is also named in this story.

Yet another wife of Herod the Greats had a son Aristobulus who in turn had a daughter named Herodias. That daughter married her father's half-brother Philip.

Herod Antipas fell in love with his half-brother Philip's wife, so he divorced his wife and took Herodias, who already had a daughter by Philip, Salome.

Herodias was both his sister-in-law and his niece. She had been married to her uncle Philip and how she's married to her uncle Herod Antipas.

You get the point. This marriage was incestuous, adulterous and against Jewish law. And John the Baptist had the courage or the foolishness to say out loud to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." It was the death of him.

This is a story of great contrasts between two men, one a king and the other a prophet, one a secular pagan and the other a godly follower of Jesus, one an unrepentant sinner and the other a sinner calling sinners to repentance. Let's look into the character and actions of these two men.

Herod Antipas.

Herod was living the dream. He had inherited from his father Herod the Great rule over Galilee. He was rich and famous and associated with the powerful and influential. He had multiple palaces. When he threw a birthday party for himself the guest list was a veritable who's who.

Herod had another side to him as well. I hesitate to call it a religious side, but he had some interest in spiritual things. He had some sense of fear of John the Baptist, he knew he was a holy and righteous man.

Herod would listen to John and was taken in by the things he had to say. John's words had the ring of truth in Herod's ears. And no doubt Herod took some of it to heart. There were things he was glad to hear.

But King Herod was a man with a troubled conscience. You can be rich and powerful, surrounded with all the best things in life, wine, women and song, rich friends, mansions filled with toys, everything that makes a life enjoyable, but still be tormented and troubled with reminders of your guilt and shame.

While Herod had respect and fear for John the Baptist, he also hated him, hated how he spoke so clearly and plainly, telling the truth and rebuking his sin. John kept disturbing his conscience.

Long after John's death, his death would continue to play on Herod's conscience. The work of Jesus and His apostles would continue to remind Herod of John, to the point he thought John was back from the dead.

Herod is a picture of the secular man. His life is so modern, parties, drinking, sensuality, divorce, remarriage, power, pride and finally murder. His religion was a hobby, a diversion, something that held some interest but there were too many other distractions.

Modern life is just one attempt at distraction after another, one temporary pleasure after another, just trying to eat, drink and be merry until we die (see I Corinthians 15:32).

Churches today are filled with people who have an interest in religion, in hearing more about the truth, but can't bring themselves to pay the full price of selling out to Christ in total commitment.

John the Baptist.

When we turn to consider John the Baptist, what a study in contrasts.

Mark 1:6-7 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."

By the world's standards, he was poor. And his mission wasn't about him but someone else, he was a servant to one greater.

Here's a good and honest and righteous man, a man of convictions who lived according to them. His life was attractive and attracted attention. He was respected and looked up to. He was living for something other than just himself. He was a man who exemplified courage, who wasn't afraid of death. He is a true servant of God.

And his life is snuffed out at the age of about 31 or 32. The man Jesus called the greatest man born of a woman (Matthew 11:11) died to satisfy a "cocktail wagger" (James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 189). He was killed to satisfy the hatred of an adulterous woman.

Given the widespread treachery and political intrigue surrounding the whole Herodian clan, wouldn't John have been wise to steer clear of them. If he had left them in their sin, couldn't he have lived longer to do more good?

Why did John wade into such a politically volatile situation? Aren't we all face these kinds of decisions on a smaller scale, at school, at work, with certain relatives?

Here we see the difference between Herod's conscience and John's conscience. John's conscience was clear, he spoke the truth, without fear of consequences. He didn't vacillate, or coddle or compromise, or go all PC. He didn't pander to the powerful or sugar coat sin for the sinful.

John didn't follow opinion polls, he didn't cater to special interest groups, or conveniently look the other way, he didn't measure his words based on what would be popular.

John would rather speak the truth plainly and be in prison than use flattery or silence to keep him safe and out of harm's way. As Jesus said no greater man has been born of woman.

Application and conclusion.

Let's draw out two applications from the lives of these two men, *conscience and the cost of discipleship*.

Conscience.

Scripture says that God has not left Himself without a witness in the world. Our consciences are a clear witness to the presence of God, of a God who is moral, who has created a moral universe with right and wrong, and good and evil.

We all have a conscience, an internal GPS, an internal gyroscope, a witness to the truth, to justice and injustice, to good and evil.

Herod couldn't escape the quiet whispers every day of his sin, of his adultery, of his foolish oath, of his murder, of his resistance to the truth and his being in league with the devil.

All of us know when our consciences are pricked, when the Holy Spirit pierces through to the depths of our souls and convicts us.

Hebrews 4:12-13 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Herod was captive to his sin, a slave to his adultery. He didn't want to change his ways and give up what he wanted. Herod's conscience was pricked, but not enough to do what is right.

Some sins are so sweet, some sins are so painful to part with, so much a part of our nature or temperament, some sins are constantly right in front of us and too difficult to resist.

When we hold one thing back, one sin, one vice that we don't want to let go off, that becomes an idol that stands between us and Christ and our salvation. If we renounce all sins but one, that one sin will torment us and give us no peace or rest. Our conscience will not be appeased by being mostly clean or mostly free.

We must guard our hearts from listening to sermons again and again but resisting the truth, resisting the convicting work of the Holy Spirit working in our consciences.

Let us be able to say with the Psalmist:

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Don't sin against your conscience. Don't act in a manner contrary to your conscience. Don't ignore it. I repeatedly ask God to keep my conscience sharp and clear, to not let me deceive myself or get casual with sin. I pray this for myself, for my sons and for my church family.

When we hold on to a sin, we hate anyone telling us about it. Darkness hates light. We want to be left alone, we don't want our conscience stirred up about it. We get defensive about it.

Defensiveness is a pretty good indicator that we are holding on to something wrong. Defensiveness says we don't want to hear the truth, we don't want to change, we don't want a different perspective. Defensiveness makes it very difficult to be honest with ourselves. Defensiveness is a moat with alligators meant to protect our castle of insecurity, or guilty conscience or some dark side.

Use your defensive reactions as a sign to you that you are most likely defending something that's not good in you or about you and that if you want to be healthy you need to let down the castle gate and invite the other perspective in and hear the truth you are resisting.

There is only one cure for a guilty or bad conscience, the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus is the cleansing fountain.

I John 1:6-7 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Hebrews 10:19, 22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ... 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Cost of Discipleship.

This story fitted into the story of the sending out of the apostles into the world to preach the gospel, reminds us of the danger and cost of following Jesus in a world full of lust, greed, power and hatred of the truth and righteousness.

There's a cost, there's a consequence. We should be bold and frequent in communicating this to our children from early on so they're not surprised when trouble and affliction come.

There's an inseparable connection between mission and martyrdom, between discipleship and death, between commitment and cost, between killing sin or being killed by it.

If you want to follow Jesus, you should first count the costs and to do that you should meditate on the story of John the Baptist.

Mark 8:34-38 Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The world of Jesus was more like Afghanistan or Iraq than like America. We can't understand or appreciate what much of the Christian world faces unless we meditate on stories like the beheading of John the Baptists.

We have a too romanticized view of the NT. Every book of the NT contains some glimpse of terrible sin, immorality, imprisonment, torture or death. We will be too soft and fearful if we do not consider the thought that one day that could happen to our grandchildren. We will not be able to walk through the valley of death unless we have a deep faith in Jesus.

Mark is writing to Christians in Rome living under the threat of Nero, the wicked and cruel emperor who took delight in executing Christians. Mark is urging the Christians to faithfulness in the face of death. This makes sense to Christians in Nigeria and Somalia right now.

This kind of stuff happens in our world and it happens for purposes that are lessons to us.

John's death forces us to think about the commitment and our commitment and the cost and whether we are up to it.

How often are faithful Christians and Christian attacked and criticized and hated for speaking the truth in love, for warning souls that are in danger.

This is why as our culture grows increasingly wicked their consciences will hate even the presence of Christians and they will seek to silence their own guilt by driving from their sight any sign of Christianity, crosses, churches, Christian ministries and programs, etc.

Tyrants will not tolerate truth and righteousness. Caesar couldn't stand that Christians would not bow and say Caesar is Lord.

It isn't tolerated in North Korea, it won't be tolerated in Muslim nations. Get clear in your mind and heart to whom you will be most loyal and for whom you will die and for what you will die.

The worship of God and of Jesus Christ is a subversive act. It is giving worship and allegiance to a higher authority and a higher power, and the day is coming when there will be those in power and authority who won't tolerate such subversive activity.

John lost his life defending the sanctity of marriage and of honoring the marriage bed.

When I say it that way all of a sudden we can't help but be struck by how relevant this is. Christians are standing up for the sanctity of marriage and of what marriage is and how God creates it and defines it. And Christians and churches are coming under attack for speaking up in the public square and in the political realm.

The Christian voice is being silenced step by step.

It is never popular to speak the moral will of God. It is never popular to call sin sin and to call people to repentance for the sake of their souls and their eternal destiny.

The path is broad and smooth and popular that leads to destruction and many are they who take that path (Matthew 7:13). Who will speak?

There are times when we must give the offense of the gospel in the face of sin. In fact it is an act of unfaithfulness to the gospel not to give the offense.

Welcome the rebukes of a brother, he is a true friend.

Proverbs 27:5-6 Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Proverbs 28:23 Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.

James 5:19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

May God in His mercy send more John the Baptists to our world, to our nation, to our churches and especially to each of us that we might have our sin rebuked that we might be saved from it.