

Success Reconsidered

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

July 19, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 2 Samuel 6.1-5, 12b-19;
Psalm 24;
Ephesians 1.3-14;
Mark 6.14-29

One of the first times I was getting ready to preach on these texts from the lectionary, I had a gathering of friends over to my house on a Friday evening, four of whom were fellow clergy. At one point in the evening, my friend Richard looked over and said, "So what are you doing with the lectionary texts this week?" The be-heading of John the Baptist, the story of David dancing before the ark (which is rather benign until you read the intervening verses that the lectionary politely skips over that include this violent moment when the assembly carrying the ark stumble and one of them inadvertently touches the ark and is struck dead on the spot). These are some difficult passages of Scripture to be sure. It can be hard to hear anything remotely like good news in texts like these that are both puzzling and brutal.

So why *does* Mark tell this story? Why does he place it *here*? The passage before it, that we read last week, offers the report of the disciples on their very first mission: "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."¹ By that report their mission was quite successful. Given the rather cool response Jesus had received in his hometown, it was heartening to hear that the disciples walking in his footsteps had made such great strides. The text following the one we read today records one of Jesus' most remarkable miracles: the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus and his disciples were drawing crowds. Word of their success and the impact they were making for God's kingdom had reached the attention of King Herod.

¹ Mark 6.13, NRSV

You think it is hard for your family and friends to accept a prophetic word from God you have to offer them? Political leaders are even less receptive when challenged by prophetic truth. Clearly, Mark is interested in making the parallel between John's ministry and Jesus' ministry. He opens his gospel with the story of John the Baptist. He returns to it here using the bizarre legend about John's fate in order to foreshadow what will be the fate of Jesus and of his disciples. Speaking truth to power can quite literally cost you your head!

Not much has changed. We had to put legislation in place to protect whistle blowers because of the scandals a few years ago that made clear to us just how risky it is for people to speak up when they see corruption in the work place and how dangerous it is for us a society if they don't. You would think that speaking the truth and standing up for what is right would be valued and rewarded, but again and again we have seen how people and institutions that are in positions of power resist those kinds of challenges.

It isn't always about uncovering corruption. Sometimes you can feel the danger of prophetic ministry when those in power demand unanimity where it becomes a violation worthy of discipline to simply voice your conscience in opposition to the accepted point of view. The Reformed Church in America at its General Synod gathering in June passed a resolution that seems to do just that. We know that there are a variety of perspectives on the question of how to welcome and include those with various sexual orientations in the life of the church. And for a time there has been a spirit of open dialogue in the RCA around those differences. But a resolution was passed that seemed to close the door on that spirit of open conversation. And it leaves people wondering whether it will now become a dangerous thing to speak your conscience on this controversial issue. My prayer is that fear will not make any of us silent.

It's easy to be tempted by the mythology of our culture – the American dream – that teaches an equation that goes something like this: Hard work equals success and success equals popularity. If you work hard and create results those results can be measured and admired. Admiration can bring you power and power brings the promise of freedom. I'm amazed at how

seductive this mythology can become even for Christians and churches and ministers who at times begin to live out of this paradigm. When someone asks how your ministry is going at the church they want to hear things like how many people are in worship, how many new programs have your started, what is the size and scope of your influence? Be sure it is measurable.

If John had been playing that game, he would never have challenged Herod. Jesus would never have gone to Jerusalem and gone toe to toe with the Pharisees and the chief priests. Prophetic ministry has a way of eventually bringing us into conflict with those who are in power, and who love that power, and who seek to keep that power. It isn't shocking that someone like Herod might get caught up in duplicity, manipulation, and violence. In the next couple of weeks as the Old Testament stories of David unfold, this twisted web of manipulation and treachery will be mirrored in the life of the great King David. Power has this way of corrupting even the good hearted and the ones who seek to live in the will of God.

Mark doesn't offer this story of Herod and Herodias to caution us against the corruption of power, though. He offers it as a reminder that success in ministry does not always equal success in the eyes of the world. He invites us to reconsider what defines success. Mark is recounting here a series of great moments (the mission of the disciples, the feeding of the five thousand). With this story he offers this counsel: "Don't think that these successes are going to lead to some moment of glory with Jesus riding into Jerusalem to take the throne of David. What happened to John will happen to Jesus and it could very well happen to you if you follow in the way of God."

Mark is writing to Christians living some 60 or 70 years after the birth of Christ and they are suffering persecution from the state because of their faith and as a result of their ministry. They live in fear and they likely wonder whether they are doing the right thing. Because if they were wouldn't God be blessing them for it? Wouldn't they enjoy prestige - that great marker of success? Instead they have become targets. Mark is telling them with this story, to hold on, to press on, to stay the course and not be swayed by the resistance they are encountering.

This is a Word we need to hear as well. This story invites us to keep faith in the midst of fierce resistance. Joanna Adams is pastor Emerita of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta Georgia and a contributor to the magazine *Christian Century*. I love the way she once described the purpose of this story in the gospel of Mark: “We know that it would take more than a decapitation to stop the truth of God, more than a crucifixion to stop the Son of God, more than persecution to stop the mission of God. All the important guests at Herod's birthday party would never know what we know--that after Herod was sealed in his grave, you and I would be thinking about John the Baptist and rejoicing that gospel power was still on the prowl.”²

That is the good news buried in this bizarre story...when we begin to despair that our efforts to reform our government, or restore our marriage, or reclaim our joy and peace of mind in the midst of struggle...we come back round to the truth. That God's work in the world is stronger and more enduring than the fiercest resistance to it.

I don't know where you might be bumping up against resistance today. Maybe you feel it most when you look at the state of American politics or consider the General Synod's passage of R-56 as it has come to be known. Maybe you feel it most when you look at your own family, how chilly or fiery those relationships have become. Maybe you feel it when you take note of how impossible it seems to stay focused on the commitments of your faith in the rush of daily life.

Don't be discouraged. Resistance to God's grace and God's truth might be inevitable but it is not eternal. It is temporary in a way that God's will is not. Mark's word to his community...Mark's word to us is this: Hold on! Keep yourself close to God. Even if the worst of your fears comes true, know that God will not let you go. Gospel power is still on the prowl and you can trust that power to sustain you.

Thanks be to God!

² Joanna Adams, *A Terrible Text - Living by the Word* *Christian Century*, June 28, 2003.