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Mark 6:14-29

CLASH OF KINGDOMS

John the Baptist should have stuck to doing baptisms. He could have played it safe and just focused on dunking people in the River Jordan. But he didn't. He had to go and question the morality of King Herod. And because of that, he lost his head.

That the gospel writer of Mark would devote so much attention and space to this story about the beheading of John the Baptist is strange when you consider the nature of Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel could be considered the *Reader's Digest* version of the gospel story. It is the shortest of the four gospel accounts. Compared to Matthew, Luke, and John's gospels, nearly everything in Mark is a condensed and shortened version. For example, the entire temptation story of Jesus takes place in just two verses in Mark's gospel. Mark wastes no words. If a story or a detail is included in Mark's gospel, you can be sure it is there for a reason.

So why would Mark, the champion of less is more, devote a whopping 15 verses of his gospel to this story about John the Baptist's arrest and beheading, a story that on the surface doesn't seem to have anything to do with Jesus?

Well, to begin with, even though Jesus is *not* directly mentioned in this story, it has everything to do with Jesus. This story comes immediately after Jesus has experienced rejection by his hometown community and after he has sent his disciples out in pairs to do ministry and told them to expect rejection. And then Mark includes this story about John's arrest and beheading--a story that illustrates to be sure an extreme form of rejection. In the story of John's beheading Mark gives us a foreshadowing of what awaits Jesus. We the readers can begin to see the specter of the cross emerging in the story. We begin to see the cost involved in following

God's way and proclaiming God's truth. John's beheading prepares us for what lies in store for Jesus.

But the story about John's beheading isn't just a foreshadowing of rejection and sacrifice. It is also about a clash of kingdoms. This story reveals the confrontation that takes place between the Kingdom of God and all the different kingdoms of this world that claim our allegiances and rule our hearts and minds. Mark repeatedly shows Jesus clashing with the forces that oppose the Kingdom of God. Sometimes Jesus clashes with those kingdoms that dominate the *individual* mind and soul and which claim our allegiance: our selfishness, our greed, our fears, our prejudices. And sometimes Jesus clashes with those forces at work in the *larger* community--the customs, policies, priorities held by governments or social or religious entities that harm or alienate people, especially vulnerable people.

Here in this story about John the Baptist, we see this clash of kingdoms occur once again. John the Baptist had the temerity to question the morality of King Herod--who served as Caesar's ruling agent for Palestine. This was not the same Herod who was ruling when Jesus was born, but rather another Herod. But what this Herod shared in common with the one we may remember from Jesus' birth story was his misuse of power, his immorality, his self-aggrandizement. Herod decided that he wanted his brother's wife and so he took her for himself. Just that simple. And he could do it because he had the power to do it. And John the Baptist did what no one else had the courage to do: he publically criticized Herod for his immorality. He proclaimed that such behavior was not in keeping with the way of God. And this landed John in prison.

It is possible that John might have been released from prison at some point if it had not been for Herod's birthday party. There at the party, with the wine flowing and all those

important figures gathered to heap praise upon King Herod, Herod's vanity got the best of him. After his daughter dances for the party, Herod shows off in front of the crowd by making a big promise to give her whatever she might ask for. It's a gesture of vanity--a demonstration to highlight his power. Once again, the attention is redirected to himself. Notice me! Notice how powerful I am that I can grant big promises! But when her mother coaches the daughter to ask for John the Baptist's head, Herod's own vanity constrains him. In an effort to save-face, to appear strong and resolute, Herod feels he cannot reject her request. And so John the Baptist loses his life and becomes the victim of the vain whims of an ego maniac.

John the Baptist's beheading reveals a kingdom that is morally bankrupt. But such kingdoms and leaders are not just the stuff of history. We today still contend with leaders who misappropriate power. We know how to recognize them. They strut. They self-promote. They silence criticism. They tell lies and twist the truth. They maneuver and orchestrate matters to benefit themselves. They demean and disregard the weak. They deflect fault or responsibility and cast guilt upon the vulnerable. In other words, they behave in ways that are antithetical to the Kingdom of God. And John the Baptist had the courage to say that.

In this regard, John the Baptist serves as a forerunner to Jesus. Jesus came to challenge and upend those persons and empires who uphold values that are antithetical to the Kingdom of God. Some of those powers reside within each and every one of our hearts and minds. And some of those powers are at work in society, and government, and churches, and institutions. Jesus confronted these other kingdoms that rule our lives and claim our allegiances in order to proclaim a vastly different kingdom--the kingdom of God.

We come to understand what the Kingdom of God is like by looking at Jesus and what he did and said. With Jesus, the weak were valued, the vulnerable were protected. Jesus spoke

God's truth and called individuals to claim personal responsibility for their behaviors. He was generous with compassion and forgiveness. He put the interests of others above the interests of the self. In the eyes of the powerful of this world, the values of the Kingdom of God may look foolish and weak. But we know, we people of faith know from the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that God's kingdom is the only true way of life that offers meaning, and that God's kingdom does indeed triumph over every power that tries to hurt or divide.

There is a new documentary out in the theaters called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* It is about the life of Fred Rogers, of the long running children's television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who was genuinely the gentle, kind, caring man he appeared to be on TV. Mr. Rogers offered the children and adults watching his program a vision of a radically different world: a world of kindness where everyone is valued; a world where it is ok to be vulnerable; a world where the weaker members are cherished and in fact have something important to teach the stronger members. A reporter who once did a story on Mr. Rogers shared about an interaction Mr. Rogers had with a 14 year old boy who had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair. Mr. Rogers not only spoke to the boy openly and with respect about his disability, but Mr. Rogers finished by asking the boy to pray for him. The boy was surprised. Many people had prayed for *him* in his lifetime, but no one had ever asked him to pray for them. When the reporter asked Mr. Rogers if he had done that to boost the boy's self-esteem, Mr. Rogers replied, "Oh, heavens no! . . . I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted *his* intercession."

The world we find in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* draws on the biblical tradition of the last shall be first, rather than the idea that winners are better than losers. Mr. Rogers way of regarding and interacting with his world strikes many of us as extraordinary, as unusual because

it is an approach of radical kindness at a time when public kindness is so scarce. *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* seems to clash with the one we are so accustomed to inhabiting each day of our lives. And we feel that clash of kingdoms. Most of us long and yearn for something different.

And yet, we wake up, we open our papers, we turn on the news, and we find ourselves deeply mired in a world that has far more similarities with the beheading of John the Baptist than it does with *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. The kingdoms of the world seem to have the upper hand. And we feel overcome.

The hope we have from the sad and sordid tale of John the Baptist's beheading, and the hope we have in our own world of cruelty and unkindness, is that God's kingdom is more powerful than the kingdoms of this world. The hope we have is that God's kingdom will triumph over all the dark powers of this world and all the dark powers of our hearts and minds. And the hope we have for ourselves right now is that God has given us a vision of a different world. The good news is that God has shown us the Kingdom of God and its beauty and its meaning. That is what Jesus does for us. He shows us this beautiful other world. And then, then you and I are given personal invitations to live in *that* world, to be part of *that* kingdom. To be sure, the gospel does not sugar coat the Kingdom of God. We have examples of John the Baptist and Jesus himself to warn us that living in the Kingdom of God can indeed be hazardous. It takes courage and conviction to live out kingdom principles in this world. Our lives, our values, our priorities, our actions will clash with the world around us. We are given a choice: what kingdom will you follow, what kingdom will you support? You see, there are many different "neighborhoods" we could choose to live in--to borrow the language of Mr. Rogers. There are many different neighborhoods. But God offers a place for us in a radically different neighborhood. And I know the one I would rather live in.