

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 6:14-29

July 16, 2006
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14King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

15Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

16But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

17For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. 18For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

21Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." 23And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

24She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

25At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

26The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. 29On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

During Advent I confessed to you my ambivalence towards our camel-hair wearing, locust and honey eating, shouting out in the wilderness prophet John the Baptist. Surely he was smelly, dirty, and maybe even a little tiring with his doomsday forecasting about the Judgment Day. But John, no matter how dirty or smelly, did not deserve what happened to him in this morning's gospel reading.

This Bible story reads like a soap opera plot. King Herod married his brother's wife, who was named Herodias—while his brother was still alive mind you. John the Baptist suggested to Herod that perhaps this wasn't a good choice because marrying one's brother's wife was against the law. Herod knew that John was right but he just couldn't help himself. And he also couldn't help but like this wild man John who always had something interesting to say.

Soon it was Herod's birthday and he threw a big ol' party at the palace for all of his friends. There was live entertainment, including a belly dancer, who happened to be Herodias daughter, Herod's step-daughter. And despite the incestuous nature of this particular form of entertainment—getting together with the guys to watch your step-daughter gyrate and shimmy across the fine marble floors of the palace, Herod admitted that he and his guests were pleased with what they were seeing—so pleased in fact that Herod offered his step-daughter whatever she wanted—up to half of his kingdom. That must have been some fine belly dancing.

Well, it was quite an offer and as most young women do, the belly dancer turned to her mother Herodias for advice. Herodias didn't coach her to ask for jewels or the summer place on the

Mediterranean or even a fine, young prince to be her husband. Instead, Herodius who was really ticked at John the Baptist for pointing out the unlawfulness of her marriage to her husband's brother, asked for John the Baptist's head. And so the belly dancing step-daughter made her way back into the party and made the request. And though Herod really liked John the Baptist and was, as the scripture puts it "greatly distressed", he ordered the beheading anyway because he had made an oath, in front of all of his buddies, to give her what she wanted and he was too proud to go back on his word. And so, because John had upheld the law of God, he was killed. Ah yes, beware the belly dancer, or more precisely, beware the belly dancer's mother who couldn't bear the message of God that John brought and so she just had him killed.

John died because he spoke up and shared the word of God. And it's because of stories like this—stories of prophets and martyrs of the Christian faith—and other faiths for that matter—who were willing to die because they believed in God's love, justice, and peace—it's because of stories like these that I have been getting rankled lately when I hear attacks on religion in general and Christianity in particular. This is nothing new—it happened all of the time when I was in seminary. I'd go to a friend's party—someone who wasn't a fellow seminarian—and as soon as I'd reveal in a conversation that I was studying to be a minister, the party-goers would line up to tell me all the reasons why they didn't believe in God and why I was foolish and naïve because I did. It didn't take me long to figure out that I needed to change my story. So when I went to a party off campus, I started telling new folks I met that I was in the salvage business. They immediately thought I meant cars and never asked enough questions to uncover the truth that I was in the business of salvaging souls—not scrap metal. And so it's not new to me nor do I expect other folks to believe what I believe. But what does get to be a bore, and sometimes even ticks me off, is when the judgments against Christianity start flying and begin to feel like personal accusations and insults instead of philosophical questioning or religious exploration. The latter I welcome, the former is self-righteous and tedious.

This isn't to say that the critiques of Christianity and other religions are not, at least in part, true. I readily agree with folks who say that most of the world's wars have been waged over issues of religion—but most religious scholars would agree, at least those who don't get caught up in the fundamentalist extreme—that all of the world's largest religions are love-based and support peace and justice, not war and oppression. And so I say that many wars have been started by religious fanatics—not average Joe's and Jane's like you and me who are just trying to live right and love right.

I'm also well aware that there are folks who live up to the reputation of being judgmental and closed-minded Christians, these are the Christians who tend to crowd the airwaves of talk radio and religious broadcasting programs. To folks on the outside these people who claim to represent Christ are really just hypocrites who wouldn't know Jesus if he sat down beside them in the pew. These folks are sexist, homophobic, classist, and racist folks who try to use the Bible to support their political and moralist views. And because, when taken out of context, individual verses and stories in the Bible can be interpreted to support just about any view or perspective no matter how cruel or divisive, these squeaky wheels can make us Christians look like a hypocritical and judgmental lot. But I know, and you know, that these folks are the exception, not the rule. Indeed, it was Congregationalists who spearheaded the abolitionist movement in the early years of our country's existence. It was in the church that many women were first

given the opportunity to speak and make their voices heard. It was the church that stood up for workers rights and children's rights during the Industrial Revolution. It was brave, courageous souls in the church who recognized the evils of Nazi Germany and stood in solidarity with their Jewish brothers and sisters and paid the ultimate price in concentration camps. It was folks in churches who were most effective at organizing relief efforts along the Gulf Coast after last year's horrific hurricane season. Church folks aren't a bunch of hypocrites, church folks are a bunch of helpers and without us most of the charities and relief efforts in this and other countries would fall flat and there would be a whole lot more suffering in this world.

When folks talk about religion as a crutch it bugs me. What, pray tell, about being a religious person makes life easier? As Christians we're called upon to give of our hard-earned money and skills to help others. That's not easy, it's challenging. It would be easier to say it's all horse putootey and cling onto our resources for our own use and enjoyment. But we're compelled to do otherwise not out of guilt but out of an understanding of our interdependence and our belief that this is what God wants us to do. As Christians we're called upon to love and forgive our enemies. This is not easy. Forgiveness is hard work. Getting along with folks we don't like in order to do greater good is noble, it's not the easy way out. As Christians we're called upon to serve others. Anyone who has signed up to go on the mission trip to New Orleans in October can, I'm sure, think of a lot easier and more fun ways to spend 10 days of their lives than driving 36 hours round trip to go to an unfamiliar place to spend hours and hours sorting through filth and debris or putting up drywall while fighting the heat, the humidity, and possibly even snakes all in order to help out some folks we've never even met. Where's the crutch in that? As Christians we're called upon to love one another and over the past few weeks we've all learned what a tough road we end up traveling because we love someone. If we hadn't loved Beth, if we had shut ourselves off from her charm, energy, and caring and just gone on our merry way not investing ourselves in this religious community, well then we wouldn't still be feeling so sad and heartbroken. Being a Christian isn't easy. It's consuming, exhausting, demanding, and challenging. Many, including John the Baptist, have lost their lives because they chose to believe as we do. We stand to lose some of our time, our money, our resources, and our creature comforts in the name of what we believe. And yet we don't think of it that way, do we? We think of what we gain—not what we lose. Because we believe we have a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of something that is so much bigger than we are. But I don't think that any of us have a sense that all of this makes life any easier. Yes, it can be comforting and inspiring and helpful and meaningful—but easy—not really.

William Sloan Coffin, a famous Christian preacher spoke to this issue. When a critic stated to him, "Well isn't all religion just a crutch?" Coffin replied, "And who's to say you don't have a limp?" And so perhaps it is a crutch because Lord knows we've all got a limp. We're broken people—we have addictions, we have anger, abandonment, and whatever-else-the-psychologist-tells-us issues, we have broken relationships, we have festering wounds, we have grudges, we have secrets, shame, heartbreak, sadness, sickness, and grief. And so, if our Christian faith is what sees us through these broken places in our lives and helps us to live and love anyway, then so be it. So maybe it's a crutch, I'll give 'em that because it takes courage to admit that you can't walk alone and you do need some help. But never let it be said that it's easy. Because it's not. And because it's not, I'm glad you're here. And I suppose that's why you are here, because you know it's not easy. You know it's too hard to go it alone. You know it's too hard to go day

after day, week after week, striving for the peace, justice and love that God wants for us all without coming here to this spiritual home, this sanctuary, to get a little R&R and inspiration. If it were easy, we wouldn't need this. If it were easy, we wouldn't need each other.

John the Baptist needed to beware the belly dancer. We need to beware the critics and hypocrites, the fundamentalists and radicals who would dismiss and/or distort our faith. Because they're taking the easy road—the road of ignorant bliss cloaked under the guise of intellectualism or the black and white, our-way-or-the-highway road to religion that lets them determine who's in and who's out which is easy but not faithful, they don't have to work as hard. Cynicism is easy. Believing while doubting, answering yes to God without knowing exactly what you're getting yourself into, and being willing to connect and love and live in this community aren't easy. But they are what make this life worth the living—at least to us. And if these things are not what make life worth living to others then that's fine for them, but they need not demean, insult, or otherwise dismiss us. And that's why we need to stick together, to carry each other along through the tough spots, and to gather here to thank God for this family and for our opportunities to live, love, pray, and serve. It's not easy sitting in this hot, stuffy room, sweaty and parched—and yet, there's no place that I'd rather be right now. If this is the crutch—God give us the limp and we'll hobble along together.