

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, Ma
Rev. Kevin M. Smith
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Mark 6:14-29

Leadership

What a mess old Herod was!

It's a wonder to me that Caesar put him in charge of anything! He married his brother's wife. Now, perhaps back then that wasn't so bad if his brother had died. But, we don't hear that in this story; we hear that John the Baptist criticized Herod for marrying his sister-in-law, so I'm guessing his brother wasn't dead yet. And, Herod's new wife now was angry at John for passing judgement on the marriage. Can you imagine the dinner table discussions between Herod and his new wife? Not good for digestion, I would suspect. Herodias was so enraged by John's judgement against them that she wanted him killed. (You know, now that I think about this it sounds like a plot out of the Godfather movie or the TV series the Sopranos. Herodias wanted John to "sleep with the fishes," as they would say in these shows.)

Funny thing was, though, Herod really liked John! He loved hearing his stories and, I suspect, in Herod's heart of hearts he knew that John made a lot of sense and was only trying to heal Herod's troubled soul. Herod was even was John's protector. Something within Herod, even though his brain, didn't always grasp the meaning of John's words, trusted this rough hewn guy who spoke about repentance and turning your life around to follow God.

So, one time Herod, throws a party for all his well-wishers and gets caught up in his emotions over the dance of his wife's daughter, which I guess, was really his niece, and is so thrilled and moved that he promises her anything she wants. This was a guy who obviously didn't think things through very much and made decisions in the whim of the moment. And Herodias' daughter who was certainly more cautious than King Herod goes to her Mom and asks what she should tell Herod to do. Herodias, not one to miss a chance, asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter, so to speak. Herod, being the wishy washy, fearful, and juvenile leader that he was doesn't want to look bad in the eyes of his political base, as we would say today. He decides to do something he knows isn't right, something which goes against his own wishes, and grants the wish just to satisfy his supporters. Today we would say that Herod was just pandering to his base in spite of what was best for his country.

The thing that Herod loved the most, of course, was his power. His ego was so big and so fragile, his wisdom so lacking, his maturity so stunted that he would do anything to please those who helped put him in his leadership position. The

problem was, though, is the emotionally and intellectually stunted Herod, knew nothing about leadership.

Leadership sometimes means you have to lead. Sometimes you have to make the tough calls that may not always please those around you, or those you are leading. Sometimes you have to disappoint the sycophants who idolize you because they know you will do just what they want even if it means catering to their most selfish desires.

When the disciples didn't like to hear about the path that Jesus was on and the results he expected, when Simon Peter took Jesus aside to chastise him when Jesus described a messiah not of Peter's imagination, Jesus had to reply to him, "get behind me Satan!" Jesus was willing to upset his base of support from time to time to do what was right.

Leadership has its costs. Sometimes leadership can be a very lonely place when you have to make unpopular, but wise decisions. Leaders don't make decisions out of emotion and upon a whim or the latest popular flavor of the day. Leaders don't do things just to feed their ego. Leaders consult all sides on an issue. Leaders take the time to listen to knowledgeable and wise people on both sides of a tough decision before acting. Leaders think about chess moves five steps ahead. Leaders don't make promises they can't or would not want to keep. Leaders are honest with whom they serve.

There is an aspect of leadership, too, that must be unselfish. In fact, it's a good practice to check your own self interests at the door when you assume the leader's office. These are the toughest of all decisions to make—those that go against your own personal wishes, or advancement, or success, or ego. One of the toughest decisions I ever made in my life cost me a job I dearly wanted.

I was relatively new in my political career when I was asked to apply for the chief of staff to the majority leader of the Oregon House of Representatives. As far as staff positions go, next to the chief of staff of the Speaker of the House, it was the second most powerful staff position. Unfortunately, the state representative who was the majority leader of the House had gotten into some ethical trouble by some bad decisions he had made. In the interview I had with the Speaker of the House and some other House leaders I was asked a "hypothetical" question about what I would recommend to the majority leader if such and such were to happen as a result of the ethical mistakes. It is not an easy thing to speak the truth to power especially when that power might be your future boss. How was I to answer? Needless to say, after saying that I would recommend that the majority leader resign I didn't get that job. I remember feeling as I walked out of that interview that the job was a gone but at least my

integrity was intact. Several months later the majority leader resigned. Leaders need to sacrifice their own desires at times for the better of the whole.

This story that we heard about this morning from the Gospel of Mark was a story about so much—adultery, wickedness, selfishness, fear—and most of all a story about failed leadership.

May we pray for our leaders. They need them and we do, too. Amen.