

Sermon July 12, 2015 - Pentecost 7

“Can the Dead Live?”

Mark 6:14–29



Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we begin our meditation this morning we recall the collect or prayer for receiving God's Word: "Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." (LSB 148 Grace to

receive the Word)

This is certainly a good prayer to pray especially when we find God's word hard to take. It is one thing to hear the Gospel reading for today telling us what became of John the Baptist and why, and another to ourselves in the mirror of John the Baptist's accusations as well, as we shall see in a few moments.

There are three kinds of hard sayings in the Bible, some passages are hard in the sense of difficult to understand. Some Scriptures are hard because they appear to conflict with other parts of the Scriptures and appear difficult to reconcile.

And lastly, some Scripture passages are hard because they are easy to understand but uncomfortable in their demand; that is, they are difficult to accept as our Gospel reading for today when applied to us seems hard to take.

I also recall what a young girl said one time: "I don't like coming to church often because every time I come I feel guilty and so my week turns joyless if I feel guilty"

Well said, yet statements like that help us also to draw our attention to the way God comes to us, in His word of Law and Gospel. In other words the Law is everything God commands and expects us do, but that when we fail to do what He expects or commands us to do then we do suffer the consequences of our sin, of breaking God's commandments and expectations. That is what leaves us with a guilty feeling!

But God also conveys to us His words of Gospel, of Good News, that is everything He does for us through Jesus Christ. The Gospel shows God's love through the passion, death and resurrections of Jesus Christ, which was in our place, which in turn take away our guilt, our sin and its damning consequences. But if we miss the Gospel every time we hear or read's God's word, then it is hard to take, for sure.

In today's gospel something happen to Herod Antipas, son of the infamous Herod the Great, although I not sure if he was relieved by some good news, or feeling convicted.

One thing is for sure that he believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (v 16). According to v 14, many were saying that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That, they thought, was where Jesus' extraordinary power to perform miracles came from; he's John raised from the

dead! And by their sayings today's Gospel demonstrates that the Jews of the first century certainly believed that death wasn't the end.

But such a thought couldn't have been very comforting to Herod Antipas, or likewise very disgruntling because of what he had done before. Herod had had John beheaded as a result of a foolish promise made during a debased, drunken feast (vv 22–28). People with a guilty conscience will often do and think strange things, don't they!

Herod's guilty conscience really began before John entered the picture; v 17 describes the scandalous love affair between Herod and Herodias, which led to an even more scandalous marriage. Herodias was married to Herod's brother, Philip. Tradition records that Herod seduced Herodias and then convinced her to divorce Philip and marry him. Herod seduced his brother's wife and married her in view of all the world.

John the Baptist, that fiery desert preacher of repentance, would not tolerate such an incestuous affair. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (v 18). John does what all faithful prophets and preachers of God must do: proclaim God's Law in all its force and severity regardless of the position, power, and influence of the person. Like Nathan, that famous prophet of old who looked David, the most powerful king of Israel, in the face and declared, "You are the man who deserves to die for committing adultery only to murder the woman's husband to cover the sin," so John declares what such actions were before the Lord God. Sin produces guilt, but also bring about God's condemnation.

Therefore the call for us all today is to repent. To repent of what we have done. It's not lawful for us to have other gods, misuse the Lord's name, despise His Word and Sacraments, dishonor parents and other authorities, murder our neighbor with hatred and envy, lust after sexual intimacy with someone not given to us by God as husband or wife, steal by taking what isn't ours or by not giving what we rightfully owe, destroying our neighbor's good name and reputation under the false pretense of "speaking the truth," or desiring anything or anyone the Lord hasn't given to us. The Law speaks loudly even to us Christians. "It is not lawful . . ."

A guilty conscience arises from thoughts, words, and deeds that violate God's Law. Herod knew his sin with Herodias. And he also knew John "was a righteous and holy man" (v 20). Herod's conflicted, guilty conscience led him to follow the murderous madness of his wife's rage in having John imprisoned (v 17). But Herod also protected him and even gladly heard him (v 20). Odd, don't you think? So I think that in the end although conflicted, it is with more gladness that Herod hears the man he wrongfully imprisons, the very same man telling him that living and eating and sleeping with Herodias is an offense to God, is back to life. If only it was John of course! But you and I know that he is not, but somebody else more special!

Have you noticed that when you're struggling with a particular sin, the Church and her pastors then become attractive and repelling—at the same time? Even sermons are thought to judgmental. The man or woman with the guilty conscience says, "How does he know about my sin? He's preaching to me! Who does he think he is to single me out from everyone else?!" It's true; Christians will sometimes quit coming to hear God's Word and to receive Christ's body and blood when their conscience tells them they're violating God's Law. And yet, so often they'll be the first

to defend the Church when outsiders speak ill of it. They love the Church, her pastors and members, but they refuse to join them regularly and joyfully.

Do you know how can we compare this situation? To zombies. Yes zombies, not quite dead, not quite alive. The Zombie business has been a very good successful business these days. Zombies used to come out only on Halloween, but now they're mainstream. Monster High, a line of Zombie dolls, games, and clothing accessories, makes the living dead fashionable and cool. The surge of zombies for sure demonstrate the fact that we have been curiously fascinated with death. And in the mind of many there are such things as zombies, those not quite dead but not quite alive!

In the same way it can be with us in a zombielike existence, not quite dead to the things of God but neither living in them as God desires for us.

It doesn't make sense. But then again, sin is a violation of what is good, true, and beautiful. Sin seldom makes sense. It's not without reason that the apostle Paul laments his sinful condition when he says (Rom 7:22–24): “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Imagine that, within the same man, faith and unbelief, the desire for sin and the desire for righteousness, how can that be! That's what God's Word helps us to understand and see.

But who will deliver us from the living death of a guilty conscience? The same man whom Herod thought was John the Baptist returned from the dead: Jesus, the miracle worker from Nazareth. Remember that through our baptism we have been grafted to Jesus, you are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. No longer are you walking in the futility of a sinful mind that is neither alive to God nor at home in this fallen world. You have “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13). In Jesus, you are made new and alive again. Peace with God and man is restored.

The tragic death of John the Baptist powerfully and prophetically proclaims the mission and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The disgust we feel over Herod and Herodias's scandalous and incestuous marriage should serve as a warning for us. Sin is corrosive—not just sexual sin, but any and every manifestation of violation of God's good and Holy Law. We must not allow ourselves the luxury of thinking that such sordid sins happen to others. Within each of us is a world of sins. And the Lord Jesus came to save us from them through his life, death, and resurrection. We are invited to daily pray “thy will be done” in the hope and confidence that God our Father “breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come” (Small Catechism, explanation of the Third Petition).

The death John suffers was prophecy in action, pointing to Jesus' pending death. Our Lord would not die under the order of Herod, though Herod was an accomplice (Lk 23:6–16) but of Pontius Pilate, who likewise declared his victim innocent and righteous, only to cower under pressure from others. The disciples of John took the body of their martyred master “and laid it in a tomb” (v 29). Joseph of Arimathea, a fearful disciple of Jesus, would take the Lord's crucified body from Pilate and lay him in a tomb. John the Baptist lived and died in prophecy to the mission and ministry of Jesus.

The joyous difference between the prophecy, John the Baptist, and the prophecy's fulfillment, the Lord Jesus, is that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day in order to destroy the power of death and the devil (Heb 2:14), to declare us forgiven and bring us unto eternal life (Rom 4:25), and to wash our consciences clean (Heb 10:22). So many in our world are fascinated with the foolishness of a living dead. But this is real: our dear Lord is not part of the living dead; He is death's Living Conqueror.

Can the dead live then, the dead in their sin and trespasses? Yes, Because Jesus lives, you live—pure, clean, holy in the sight of God's heavenly host. Connected to the Lord's death in Baptism, you are likewise living recipients of his resurrection life.

The stain of sin and a guilty conscience are never permanent. And this is good News. Although upon hearing the Law we do get a guilty feeling for we are convicted of our sin, but in the News of the Gospel we hear that the Lord Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity in order to give you his undying life.

Today, dear friends upon the forgiveness of your sins, live well in the joy and peace of Jesus' victory. Christ is risen from the dead!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.