

July 11, 2021

Mark 6:14-29

# “Words Have Power”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There is an episode from *Gilligan's Island* where Gilligan hits his head on a tree and dreams that he is Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde - actually, Dr. Gilligan and Mr. Hyde. In the dream he enters into a courtroom to face his accusers and the crowd boos him. With top hat in one hand and a bouquet of lilies in the other he says to them: "Sticks and stones may break my bones ... but please don't throw sticks or stones, please, please, don't throw sticks or stones."

The whole expression, as we generally have it today, came from *The Christian Recorder of March*, published in 1862: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never break me." There is a certain truth to that statement. Yet the statement is not entirely true. All of us have been exposed to words that were intended to break us, and maybe they did. It is also rather hard to be indifferent to sticks, stones, and broken bones. Most of us would be like Gilligan, "please don't throw sticks or stones."

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is full of words that were designed to break people, and a lot of people were broken in different ways in our text. And while we don't have sticks, stones, and broken bones in the lesson, we sure do have an executioner who lopped off the head of John the Baptist and put it on a platter. **Words Have Power.** There's a lot of that in our gospel lesson. Let's take a closer look.

Herodias convinced her husband to put John the Baptist into prison because of the words he spoke about her and the king. Herodias was the niece and sister-in-law of her husband, king Herod. After divorcing his first wife, king Herod seduced and persuaded Herodias to divorce her lawful husband, who was Herod's half-brother, so that they could get married. John the Baptist had the nerve to condemn the marriage, and forcefully called them to repentance by saying: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." The words of John the Baptist were a call to repentance, but those words broke Herodias, and enraged in her a grudge so great that she wanted to put him to death, and did. **Words Have Power.** She is an example of how far people will go in order to cover up their sin and those who expose them.

For as long as he could, king Herod protected John the Baptist. Mark writes that "... Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly." Again, **Words Have Power.** John's words had certainly reached king Herod's ears, but in such a way that he was filled with uncertainty, and found the words difficult to understand. Of Herod, these words of the *Parable of the Sower* apply: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path (Matt. 13:19)."

Later on in life, it would be words at his birthday banquet, where nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee were present, that would haunt the conscience of king Herod. Mark writes:

When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she

went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Now, most movies portray the dance as wildly seductive. However, there is evidence in the gospel text that the daughter of Herodias was most likely a young girl who was essentially giving what we would call today a simple but very impressive dance recital. Nevertheless, because of the words of the daughter of Herodias, king Herod would be broken and forced to do what he did not want to do. Because of his guests, he would give his word to behead John the Baptist. This would haunt Herod so completely, that when Jesus came onto the scene, he would be convinced that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

**Words Have Power.** Like I said, a lot of people were broken in our gospel lesson in various ways. But, as we consider John the Baptist, I think that these words of Jesus fit him quite well (Matt. 10:28, 32): “... do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell ... everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven ...” Sticks and stones broke his bones but words certainly did not break him.

So, what shall we make of all of this as it pertains to our own lives? Or maybe we could ask it in a different way. When God’s powerful Word comes to us what are we going to do with it? There are four very distinct options given to us in our gospel lesson. We can be like Herodias, her daughter, king Herod, or like John the Baptist.

Herodias was in love with king Herod and she did not want to hear that her love for him was wrong before God and deserving of God’s wrath. So she raged against the one who had the audacity to tell her the truth and, in doing so, she was ultimately enraged with God and his powerful words. She covered up her sin by her rage and looked for the opportunity to get rid of the voice that exposed her for who she really was. She called evil good and good evil. For her, what was wrong was right. Having seared her conscience, she silenced the voice of John the Baptist so that she would no longer have to face the truth.

Her daughter was along for the ride. Her mother simply fed her what to say and she said it, apparently with little thought about her own participation in this evil. She just got her marching orders and boldly did what she was told to do. So it is with many who follow the wickedness of others. They just mindlessly fall into step with no sensitivity as to the difference between right and wrong. They simply will champion evil because they themselves are cut from the same cloth. To expose others would be to expose themselves. Truth can be a blinding light, and many prefer the darkness of their desires.

Most people today are Herodias and her daughter. Their core value is simply: “Don’t tell me what is right and wrong. Don’t tell me and others how God wants us to be. There is no wrong or right. There is only love.” There are those who believe this in the church: “For God so loved sin that he sent his one and only Son to die for sin, that whoever believes in him may sin all the more and do so in peace.” These are those who champion and cheer personal independence and self-expression so that any suggestion that someone’s way of life might be offensive to the God who made us is largely considered out of bounds. But

as Christians, we recognize our own cesspool within and that our help comes only in the name of the Lord. We know of the good news of forgiveness and eternal life, and we want this for others. We know that it is only when we repent of our sin and turn to the cross of Jesus that we can be forgiven and saved from the wrath of God. And such who have been saved abhor sin. This was the message of John the Baptist. And those who proclaim his message today cannot allow themselves to be silenced by the threat of sticks, stones and broken bones.

May God spare us from being a king Herod, who clearly knew that what he was doing was wrong, but loved his wife and his wicked ways so much that he blinded himself and did them anyway. Here was a man who heard John the Baptist and learned of Jesus while holding on to an evil conscience, even attempting to soothe himself with their words and presence. King Herod is like the one who sits in church while calling evil good and good evil. The prophet Isaiah writes in his book (5:20-21): “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!”

As you can see, in our gospel lesson we encounter a group of people who are fully committed to living for themselves. In these verses we get an incredible view of the deceitfulness and destructiveness of sin, as well as a stark reminder of the significant opposition we face when we proclaim the words of God in a world that is in rebellion against him. John the Baptist was willing to speak the truth - a gospel truth about sin and the Savior. May it never be said of us as Jesus said of some, “For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him (Matt. 21:32).” May we rest in the Gospel which has the power to forgive and save. As our sermon hymn states:

2. It sets the Lamb before our eyes,  
Who made the atoning sacrifice,  
And calls the souls with guilt oppressed  
To come and find eternal rest.

6. May we in faith its tidings learn  
Nor thanklessly its blessings spurn;  
May we in faith its truth confess  
And praise the Lord our righteousness!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

<https://literarydevices.net/sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones/>