

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

Gruesome story this morning... John the Baptist's head on a platter... The visual of this lesson is enough to make anyone wince with discomfort-- and perhaps that's the reason for the story. The gospels don't whitewash reality. The gospels are very clear about human sin and violence.

John not only precedes Jesus in ministry, John also precedes Jesus in death. John and Jesus are connected in life and in death. The same kind of structural violence that killed John will be the same kind of violence that kills Jesus. In other words, the evil that kills both John and Jesus is not unique, and it's still present with us today...

King Herod says to the daughter, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." Isn't that astonishing? Half of his kingdom! What's he thinking? The daughter might be a good dancer, but that's a little excessive. It makes you wonder about that kingdom of his...

What's tragic is that King Herod actually liked John the Baptist. Our story says, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." Herod liked to listen to him. Herod was fascinated with John! Herod was actually trying to protect him!

But as our story unfolds, King Herod becomes trapped by his wife. And because he foolishly made an oath before the leaders of Galilee, he was backed into a corner... His hands were tied... And he was deeply grieved to comply with Herodius' request... John the Baptist's head on a platter... Herod was responsible for the killing of a man he liked and he feared.

And to make matters worse, Herod is superstitious and he's worried that Jesus, who performed all these miraculous signs and wonders, might be John the Baptist, come back from the dead-- and probably planning to bring him down! King Herod is a little bit of a basket case. He's certainly foolish, he has regrets and his conscience must be tighter than a drum. He's kind of a tragic figure.

While he may have had some good intentions, ultimately, he was ensnared and captive to his own Kingdom. So, rather than being a king who rules his kingdom, we seem to have a kingdom that rules over its king. It appears the opposite of what we would expect. Being King of his Kingdom is like the tail wagging the dog.

A similar story...

Frederick Douglass was a slave whose testimony was prominent in the struggle to end slavery. He wrote a heart wrenching narrative of what life was like as a slave. He described the frenzy of how slaves would be whipped and beat; how the master would seem to be overtaken by demons, channeling their fear into ferocious cruelty.

On one particular whipping, he mentioned that it ended only because the master had finally exhausted himself. The sight of blood had only seemed to intensify the master's rage and fury, can you imagine?

At one point in Mr. Douglass' life, he was given to a man in a larger city. As it happened, his new master married a woman from up north who had not been exposed to slavery. When she became part of the household, it was the first time ever in his life, when a white person actually saw him as a human being. Initially she was kind to him, but then slowly over time he describes how slavery changed her into a cruel and deceitful person.

The remarkable thing about Frederick Douglass' story is that he describes how slavery not only dehumanized the slave, but also dehumanized the slave owner-- the master. Like King Herod who seemed to be ruled by his kingdom, Frederick Douglass observed how a slave master became enslaved by slavery.

When even kings and slave masters become victims to their own empires, we can see how subtle and cunning evil operates. These examples may seem contrary to our common sense, but it is exactly the nature of evil to work in the shadows. Evil does not like the light of truth.

What kinds of things are we beholden to; in bondage to? What kingdoms of addiction, ideology, violence and falsehood enslave us, today?

Well, we could talk about drugs, alcohol, tobacco, gambling... They are all very real and very serious. But let's talk about some other forms of bondage that might surprise us. Things that might be a little more subtle... How about how we spend our time? According to a March 2015 report released by the Nielsen Company, which measures American media consumption, adults age 18 and older spend more than 11 hours each day using electronic devices. That's a lot of screen time! And of course, it isn't all necessarily bad; we can do a lot of positive things with our screens. But, eleven hours? Really? Is a smart phone another kind of addiction?

I'll be honest; sometimes I'm a little worried I spend too much time looking at my cell phone. Is the tail wagging the dog?

How about money and possessions? Covetousness is a thing I struggle with all the time. As we've been moving out of the house in Austin, it's been an issue that's been front and center. We've been giving stuff away. And it feels good to let some things go. But for some reason I really can't let go of certain other things. Guitars are my Achilles heel... Do I own my possessions, or do my possessions own me? Is the tail wagging the dog?

How about our politics? From watching my news feed these days, I get the feeling that politics are like sports. It's all about winning and losing... Nobody seems to care what's best for the country anymore. In fact, it seems some people want the country to fail, just so they can gloat! The left and right are mirror images of each other in their hatred of each other. There's no debate, there's no compromising, there's no middle, it's this way or that way; and winners and losers. Is political ideology really more important than our country? Is the tail wagging the dog?

Evil is subtle and cunning and deceiving. We would love to think that we are at the center of the universe; that we are in control. But the truth is—we're not. More often than we'd like to admit, we're like poor King Herod and the slave master, pawns; pretending to be in power and in charge, yet losing our consciences, our souls, disconnecting ourselves from God and each other.

So, what is the good news this morning? How does God break us free from this bondage to evil? I wonder if we could ask the question from a different angle—let's put ourselves in King Herod's shoes, what could possibly be good news for him...

Can you imagine how his conscious is bothering him; how his fear is torturing him? He meant to do well, but ultimately, he was trapped and became responsible for the death of John the Baptist...

Let's imagine for a moment, how King Herod might feel if John the Baptist did come back to life and say to him, "Herod, I know you are in bondage to sin—I know you tried to protect me, I know you were trapped and in a corner... Please don't be afraid of me, I forgive you," Can you put yourself in Herod's place; can you imagine how that would feel?

Well, this is exactly what Christ has done for us! We really do mean to do well, we want so desperately to be helpful, to make a difference in our community, but we become trapped by the things that enslave our lives. We waste our time staring at cell phones... We spend our money on possessions that own us... We get so worked up about politics we demonize each other...

We know better, but we don't do what we ought. As the apostle Paul says, we do the thing we shouldn't and don't do the thing we should. And it leads to guilt and regrets...

And it is exactly in this situation, in this bondage that Jesus comes to us and says, "I know you are in bondage to sin—I love you, and I forgive you." Now go out there, reconcile with one another and try it again... When we hear Jesus' words of absolution, we know that God comes to us in love and grace.

Our Epistle lesson today says, "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ." It is God's good pleasure to forgive us, to save us. God knows our burdens, and downfalls; God knows the crafty ways of evil, about how we are deceived into bondage. Yet, God comes to us and offers forgiveness.

Through our Baptism, God sets us free and gives us strength to face the truth about the evil that would destroy our lives. As we live into our Baptism, we seek to live with integrity and responsibility. This means that we confess the truth about our bondage to sin and know we are forgiven, so we can forgive those who trespass against us.

And it is all God's good pleasure, His arms are wide open, He hears our prayers, He calls us into truth, He forgives us, He adopts us as his children, and He calls us into His Kingdom—the Kingdom where Love wins, and Grace abounds. And our hearts are transformed into being loving, kind, and gracious people, and for the sake of the world.

Amen.