

Silencing the Opposition

Mark 6: 14-29; Psalm 24 7-12-09

In the twenty-five plus years I have served churches as a pastor, I have had people ask me why we place any emphasis on the Old Testament and its stories. After all, we are people of the New Testament, of Christianity. The Old Testament, better known as the Hebrew Scriptures, seems as if it has no relevance to us. Isn't that what the titles mean—the Old replaced by the New?

Years and years ago I might have agreed with people who questioned the value of those early scriptures. I was strictly a New Testament girl. But, I have come to learn that it is important to know something about the scriptures that Jesus knew and loved so well. He was grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures—it was all there was. He was a Jew. A working knowledge of the Bible he knew helps us understand the roots of his faith and of ours. It also helps us understand what it he was for and what it was he was against. He did not intend to found a new religion; he had hoped to tweak the one he knew so well and to help people understand that there was another way into God's presence.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures seems to be a God full of vengeance. Many of the stories seem bloody and full of anger. But, if we consider the New Testament, which we call our own, we come across some equally disturbing passages.

There is the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the many passages that condemn those who sin to an eternity spent in the fiery pits of hell, and the beating and crucifixion of Jesus.

There is also this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark. It tells of the beheading of John the Baptist. John had called Herod on the carpet for marrying his sister-in-law. Herod listened to John because he believed he was a holy man and because he thought that John had something of value to say—he liked listening to him. But, as the story goes, Herod's wife was angry about John's accusations and looked for a way to silence the opposition.

The story tells us that her daughter won Herod's favor by dancing for him at his birthday party so he told her he would give her anything she wanted—even half of his kingdom. Upon consulting with her mother about what she might request, the head of John the Baptist was asked for and delivered.

I believe a very graphic rendition of his execution was seen in "The Greatest Story Ever Told." I will always remember Salome's wild dance and the Baptist's head that of Charlton Heston, brought in on a silver platter. It was an effective message to any who would oppose the rule of Herod. I had nightmares for weeks after watching it.

In our world we see many attempts to silence the opposition—sometimes they work, sometimes they don't and rebellious movements are driven underground or appear on Twitter or Facebook. Most recently the demonstrations in Iran reminded us of demonstrations past, all around the world, that have been dealt with harshly only to resurface and eventually force change in governments. Interesting things are happening in Guatemala.

When people begin to gain wisdom, there will be better ways to deal with voices of opposition than through violent means. Very often those who are the loyal opposition are the

prophets among us. They are the ones who call out for change and for better ways of doing things. Instead of trying to discredit or destroy them, a better way of handling them is to make them part of the process. It is very wise to put all that energy and drive to work for the good of all.

As you know, I just returned from the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches Annual Meeting in Milwaukee. This was a trip full of milestones for me. I celebrated the fortieth birthday of my oldest daughter, Kathy, on June 26th as she awaits the birth of my first grandchild on August 3. I also celebrated the 25th anniversary of my ordination at dinner with a group of friends. And I attended my 35th Annual Meeting.

Very often during these meetings debate can become rather heated when we are asked to vote on issues that determine the direction of the NA. Things never really get out of hand and no one is ever literally beheaded. As Congregationalists we welcome a diversity of opinions on any subject. But, we have our greatest successes when we draw everyone into the process, in one way or another, so that people feel they have a true effect on the outcome of any decision. We are not always good at this—we are a human organization—but when we shine it is because we have listened carefully to all sides of any debate and have allowed ourselves the grace of time before we make any decision. We are not swayed by anyone dancing wildly about and or making promises that may prove deadly.

We try to focus on what it was Jesus tried to teach us: that every person has value no matter who they are or where they are in life. We do our best when we remember that each and every one of us is a child of God. We succeed most when we treat one another with respect, love, understanding, patience, forgiveness, never judging. We discover that when we try to see through the eyes of God we are in turn seen by others through those same loving, steady eyes.

When we fail it is because we substitute fear for love and we call for someone's head to protect our own position in life. We dismiss another as being no good, out of step, sadly misinformed. When we do this we walk away from the pathway set before us by Christ.

Our task, as Christians, is to guard against anything that separates us as humans. Our task is to discover what it is that unites us. When we take these tasks to heart we discover that we all share the same joys and sorrows, the same fears and loves, the same desire to work for the good of all people. When we take these tasks to heart we see that harsh ways of silencing the opposition almost always lead to paths that are divisive and destructive and lead to deeper trouble.

Our religion is all about the importance of human relationships. Even Herod knew this when he sought to preserve the life of John the Baptist while keeping him in prison—he knew John had value. The fear others had of John caused Herod to act the way he did.

We need to remember the lessons we have learned through the life and teachings of Jesus. Then and only then will we learn the pathways to justice and peace.

-- Amen