



# “Truth, Power, and the Inconvenience of the Gospel”

Text: Mark 6:1-29

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The religious landscape in the United States is in the midst of a dramatic change. While many of us can remember a time when Sunday meant getting up and going to church without fail, with no excuse being tolerated and no explanation of why a Sunday could be missed entertained, we no longer live in that time and place. Church attendance continues to slide and we are told that attending one Sunday in a month is now the average for those associated with a congregation.

Surveys of people tell us that there are now more people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” which implies that there is a perceived sense of God’s presence, but it is highly unlikely to be found inside a church. Many of these people were “burned” by the church. These folks had a bad experience in the church, maybe when they were growing up, maybe later in life when the church’s judgmental nature came to the fore. We “ran them off” and it is highly unlikely that we will ever get them back.

One of the fastest growing groups in our culture is described as “nones” - careful of the spelling, please - “n-o-n-e-s.” These are people who do not identify with any particular religion or denomination. They are not atheist or agnostic. They simply do not feel the need or have a reason to identify themselves with a church or a tradition.

What happened to the church? What did the church do to alienate so many people in so short a time? How did the church move from social influencer to seemingly irrelevant?

There are many answers to those questions, but the story before us this morning offers a few suggestions. This is not for the faint of heart. This is not easy to hear and it is not easy to preach. So, let’s work together on this and listen for what God may be saying to us.

There are three perceivable sections to our lesson this morning. Jesus returns home with his disciples and goes to the synagogue to preach. His message is made mute by the need of his townsfolk asking the question, "Just who does he think he is?"

In the second section, Jesus sends out his disciples on their first solo mission. Off the disciples go and Mark tells us that they preached, healed the sick, and cast out demons - everything that Jesus himself had done.

And then comes the third section of the passage, which is where we will spend our time this morning. This third section details the story of the execution and death of John the Baptist. What happened that John was killed by Herod Antipas? Why did it happen? That's what we will examine - along with its implications - under the title, "Truth, Power, and the Inconvenience of the Gospel."

We get a little confused because when we hear "King Herod" we think of the guy the wise men went to meet when Jesus was born. It's not him. That Herod - Herod the Great - is dead. His son, Herod Antipas, has become the "tetrarch," not really a king in the royal sense, but a person appointed by the Roman Emperor to look after the interests of Rome in his region of the empire. He is the equivalent of a "maharajah" in India, during the time of the British imperialism. Herod was a useful tool of the Empire of Caesar.

Herod Antipas has married his brother's wife, Herodias. She herself was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and her brother, Agrippa I, was the tetrarch of Galilee and a close friend of the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula. Marrying your brother's wife hardly ever works out well. Ask Henry VIII.

And that is what sets in motion the events of the rest of the story. John the Baptist preached against Antipas taking his brother's wife as his own. We are not told that this line of public condemnation did much to upset Antipas. But it made Herodias angry and when the opportunity presented itself to bring about John's demise, Herodias outsmarted her husband and silenced John once-and-for-all.

Now, for our purpose this morning, leave all the palace intrigue behind. Forget about the dancing girl. Leave all of the stuff that we are accustomed to hearing about - leave all of that by the side of the road.

The heart of the matter for us is the content of John's preaching. John was confronting the Empire of Caesar with the Empire of God. Those two empires could not have been more different. In fact, those two empires were diametrically opposed to each other. John was standing for God and the way God created the world to be. Antipas was standing for whatever pleased Antipas and the devil take the consequences.

John preached truth to power. It was a truth that the powerful did not want to hear. It challenged the powerful as leaders and as human beings. It was the unvarnished truth and it was hard to hear.

John stood for God and God's way. John unashamedly and unabashedly proclaimed God's way and called whoever heard his message to turn themselves around - that's literally what "repent" means - and to get back to living as God calls God's people to live. John called the power structures of the Empire of Caesar to return to the ways of the Empire of God.

And that is why the church is in such decline and disarray today. For far too long, the church (writ large) has been silent in the face of the world's abandonment of God's way. We have avoided challenging the errors of the world's ways. We have "spiritualized" the gospel to the point where we have pulled the teeth from the gospel's mouth. We have seen to it that the gospel doesn't offend anyone. We have made it all about being good people, being "nice," not making waves, and protecting ourselves from the world around us. The church self-silenced its prophetic voice in order to preserve itself from troubles and hardships. We have followed the risen Jesus, but we have done so without the challenge of the cross and its suffering.

And the church has become weak and pathetic. We have become pusillanimous and pigeon-hearted instead of prophetic and provocative. We have failed the most vulnerable, the most embattled, the victims of the most unjust systems and treatment, lest we be looked down on by the world around us.

And our children - and more - have walked away from us because we chose silence over speaking out, detachment over engagement, and self-preservation over embracing the risks inherent in the gospel.

In 1938, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon to his confirmation class on the occasion of their uniting with the church. In part, Bonhoeffer said:

You have only one master now...But with this 'yes' to God belongs just as clearer a 'no.' Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world. Belief means decision.

When was the last time you heard a sermon like that? When was the last time I preached a sermon like that? Bonhoeffer saw the commitment to being a disciple of Jesus Christ as consequential and momentous. We see it as something we do once a month - on average.

Twenty-five years later, in 1963, while imprisoned in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote:

The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.

Fifty-seven years later, have we - the church - changed in any significant way? Do we speak out and take action when the poor are mistreated, when inequality exists in our school system, when bald-faced lies are pedaled as truth, when women are treated as second-class citizens who are incapable of making their own decisions, when senior citizens are threatened with cuts to their financial health and medical care, or when neighborhoods are too unsafe for anyone to rationally call them home?

"Oh, please don't be controversial." My dear friends, the gospel is always controversial. If you hear someone passing off a comfortable and placating gospel of goodness, smiles, and a message that God just wants us to be "nice," it ain't the gospel. The gospel upsets the apple cart each and every time. The gospel makes us squirm. The gospel forces us to admit that we are wrong and that we have done wrong. There is nothing comfortable about the authentic gospel.

For that reason the gospel is inconvenient. It's not easy. It's not quiet. It's not without enormous controversy. It cost John his head. It cost Jesus his life. And it costs us, what? One Sunday a month?

We will probably never get back those who walked away from the church in its silence and complacency. That bridge has been burned. We can't turn back the clock.

But, there is a whole new generation of people who might just give us a listen if we have something of value to say. There is a whole new generation of people who might make some space for us, if we break out of our self-imposed obscurity and begin to challenge the injustice and unrighteousness of the world around us. There is a whole new generation of people who might consider us relevant if we could confess the mistakes of our past and listen to the world around us today.

Silence is not our security. Inaction is not our salvation. Ignorance of the problems that surround is no defense.

Like John the Baptist, like Jesus the Christ, like Dorothy Day, like Martin Luther King, Jr., like all those saints of God that stood for the fullness and edginess of the gospel, God calls God's people today to take risks, to break out of its holy shell, to challenge the Empire of Caesar, and to expand the borders of the Empire of God.

And all that we have is a promise. "I will be with you."

Is that enough? You bet it is. For now and evermore. Amen.