

**Be faithful unto death and you will receive the crown of everlasting life.**

At the end of last week's Gospel reading Jesus sent out the 12 apostles. They went out and did what Jesus told them to do. They proclaimed that people should repent. They cast out demons and anointed people who were sick with oil and healed them. The apostles were making a name for Jesus by doing the works Jesus had given them to do in his name.

Our Gospel reading today follows immediately after last week's reading, and as you can recall, today's reading was about the beheading of John the Baptist. Our reading today is linked in an interesting way with last week's reading, even though they seem to be completely different topics. At the very beginning of our reading today it says, "**King Herod heard of it.**" The "**it**" that Herod heard of was the work of the apostles in Jesus's name. When Herod heard of this, he immediately thought of what he had done to John the Baptist. His conscience was bothered, and understandably so.

Mark then goes on to tell the story of what Herod and his illegitimate wife, Herodias, had done. Theirs was a story of unbelief and unrepentance. They did not submit to the teaching that John the Baptist taught them. They resisted, each in their own ways. Herod might not have been quite so upset as Herodias, but he still put him in prison and was responsible for beheading him. Herodias was much more straightforward. She hated him.

She hated him because John had said that what they were doing was wrong. Herod and Herodias were not originally married to each other. Both of them were originally married to other spouses. Herodias was originally married to Herod's brother Philip. But they wanted to be together, so they divorced their spouses and married each other.

John the Baptist told Herod that this was adultery. The 6<sup>th</sup> commandment says, "**You shall not commit adultery.**" Marriage is a lifelong promise of love and faithfulness between husband and wife. God is the one who joins the two to become one flesh, and God is the one who ends marriages by bringing about the death of either husband or wife. Then the surviving spouse is free to marry another. When a person divorces their spouse without sufficient justification that is taking the place of God. God is supposed to decide when marriages end, not us.

I'd like to pause for a moment to take stock of our own understanding of these things in our time. God's commands concerning divorce and remarriage are perhaps not well known, but they are certainly not well heeded among us. We have a problem also with fornication, which is having sex with someone to whom you are not married. Sexual experimentation with multiple partners is the norm. Living together with someone to whom you are not married is the norm.

Whether these things are normal or not is beside the point. God is clear. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not fornicate. You shall not have this special sexual relationship without promising lifelong faithfulness. God's "no" to these things are so that he may say "yes" to a relationship that is deeper, healthier, and life-giving. Whether you or I like or dislike these commands, doesn't change the fact that they are God's commands. The appropriate response to God's commands that we have not kept is to fear God and repent.

It is obvious that neither Herod nor Herodias feared God and repented. It is quite likely, in fact, that neither of them thought much about God at all. They justified themselves in their own sight, so that they could do what they wanted to do. When John the Baptist contradicted their justification of themselves, they probably didn't think that God had anything against them. They probably thought that John was against them with some outdated, misplaced zeal for sexual purity laws. Thus they directed their hatred against John, when it was in fact God that they had a problem with. John was just the messenger. John was a faithful messenger, but Herod and Herodias punished him—first by imprisoning him, then by beheading him.

Such is the experience Christians will have who want to be faithful messengers of God. Jesus doesn't keep this a secret. He says, "If they have hated me, they will also hate you." If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, then you will take up his cross and follow him. The hatred of rebellious sinners that is really against God will be poured out on those who remain faithful to his Word.

The anger of rebellious sinners is understandable, if you will only consider how you yourself are. I don't know of anyone, including myself, who likes to hear criticism of themselves. My first reaction is to strike out against the one who tells me I'm wrong. Although this is understandable as an immediate reaction, may God grant us grace so that we come to our senses. We should realize that we are not just dealing with flesh and blood. God is behind the faithful messenger. We should not be like Herod and Herodias, who did not come to their senses. They continued on in unbelief and unrepentance.

If we are looking for an example to follow, we should be like John the Baptist. He is an example of faithfulness. John loved God and Jesus. Because John loved God, he made it his ambition to please God. John was not ashamed of God's commands or God's promises. John believed that the surest way to happiness and eternal life was by following what God teaches in the Bible.

John was very brave. He condemned sin wherever it might be found regardless of the power or authority of the ones who were sinning. He called the highest leaders in the church at that time a "brood of vipers," because they were a brood of vipers. He called Herod and Herodias adulterers because they were adulterers. This last diagnosis, even though it was true, resulted in his death.

John could have easily avoided death and a whole bunch of trouble if he would only have not cared about God's commands or God's promises or God's kingdom. All that John would have needed to do was to say, "Never mind. No big deal. Let's all just live and let live." Immediately he would have been released from prison. If only John would have melted into the general population, who are quite baffled and cowardly when it comes to spiritual things, he wouldn't have been opposed. John could have had a much more comfortable life.

But if John would have been like that, then he would not have been the bright and shining light that he was, leading people out of the devil's kingdom into God's kingdom. He would have left people just the way they were, lost in sin and unbelief. God's Word would remain unused. John wouldn't have accomplished anything that he did accomplish. John's faithfulness to God's Word helped an untold number of people to escape hell by repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus. John baptized an

untold number of people for the forgiveness of their sins. He pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” John was a good and helpful man.

You can be like John too. You are fully equipped with what John had. You have God’s commands. You have God’s promises. Those commands and promises bring about repentance and faith in those whom God has chosen. You can be a bright and shining light that helps people escape from the devil’s worthless lies and leads people to God’s truth in Jesus that saves all who believe in him.

But this will not necessarily be easy or painless. You will be tempted to please people rather than trying to please God. You must be brave in the face of opposition. There are so many ways that people might want to punish you for being different from the general population, for being proud of God’s commands and promises, which are the path to eternal life.

It is not beyond the realm of possibility that you could share a similar fate as John the Baptist. You could be thrown in prison. You could have your head chopped off. That wouldn’t be the worst thing. If that is the way that God would have you meet your Lord and Savior, then let that day come speedily. You will have lost nothing and gained everything by being faithful to Jesus.

Martin Luther says in his famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” God is a mighty fortress fully sufficient to save us in uncertain times. With the troubles we heard about last night in our nation, God’s commands and promises are still our faithful guide which cannot and will not let us down. A mighty fortress is our God, and he remains that way no matter what happens. Martin Luther says as much at the close of that hymn:

And take they our life,  
Goods, fame, child and wife,  
Though these all be gone,  
Our victory has been won;  
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

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