

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10

July 12, 2009

Sermon delivered by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld

Texts: Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

A few months ago during a snow day, some of the family was watching a movie. It was, as I recall, *The Fugitive* that featured Harrison Ford playing Dr. Richard Kimball, an escaped prisoner who had been wrongfully convicted of murder. Tommy Lee Jones plays a Federal Marshall who chases Richard Kimball through the Illinois countryside and then Chicago. At first he could care less about Richard Kimball's guilt or innocence. He simply has to capture the escaped convict. He could care less about anything else about his story.

One of the children came in to the middle of it, not knowing anything about the fast paced story, and as he saw an angry confrontation between the two main characters, he asked what we often ask when just walk into a movie in the middle of things: Good Guy or Bad Guy? And if you're watching the movie you have to stop and say, well, he's a good guy. And the guy who chasing him, well, he's a good guy, too. "So where's the Bad Guy?" And then everyone groans because they just want to watch the movie!

What leads me to remember the Good Guy or Bad Guy question is, believe it or not, Mark's Gospel. I've always, and I still, regard King Herod, this minor, but important character in the Bible as a Bad Guy. He has John the Baptist beheaded, right? And for what reason? Because he feels beholden to an oath he made to a twelve year old who performs somekind of lascivious dance in front of him and his friends at birthday party. He's an adulteror, having divorced his first wife and married the wife of his, still living, brother. If he were Roman, John the Baptizer wouldn't care. But he's a Jew, obliged to uphold Jewish law, especially as one who holds a prominent position of leadership in Israel. John the Baptist in essence claims the right of the prophet Nathan who chastened King David for his illegal and repugnant liaison with Bathsheeba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. Unlike David who publically repents and begs forgiveness, Herod is a small man, morally. His own conscience is overrun by the demands of his wife, equally grasping for power, and he's overly worried about the opinion of others. Good Guy or Bad Guy? I think we would all easily and unequivocally render the same judgment: King Herod—Bad Guy.

And historians agree with us. Herod, also known as Herod Antipus, was the last of the sons of King Herod the Great, also a bad guy who constantly and engaged in violence to secure his favor with the Roman Emperors, Marc Antony, and who treated his sons, with contempt, even the son of his first marriage exiled and then executed. Matthew's gospel as you know, relates the story of Herod the Great's ordering the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem, so anxious is he of there rising another king of the Jews. Why his is called Great? I'm not sure, except for his rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem or his being the father of the dynasty. Good Guy? Nope, bad guy, and psychologists could

easily see how his own gangster way of governing was instilled in his son, Herod, the one we hear of today.

Bad Guy. But. But. Mark the writer of the gospel might be a little dissatisfied with that characterization of Herod, the slayer of our Good Guy prophet and saint, John the Baptist. Herod is clearly no saint, but there are hints, strong hints, that Mark the Evangelist has some, if not sympathy, than some deeper understanding of Herod.

Because it's Herod who first mentions the possibility that his own evil may be overcome by resurrection. When he is told about all the amazing things the Jesus disciples are going, healing, anointing the sick and healing, casting out demons, Herod first thinks, it must be John, whom I beheaded, raised from the dead. Of course, it's not John, but Jesus, alive and his power working through the disciples hands.

He is said to be deeply grieved at the request to have John killed. He holds John in some esteem, believed John to be righteous and holy. He likes to listen to John. Perhaps he is even on the verge of a conversion as a result of John's powerful rebukes. Herod is a man who conscious is divided and even racked. He probably longs to get right with God, but knows himself enslaved by sin, by force that are just too powerful for his weak integrity to overcome. I wonder why Mark is so careful to show us Herod in all this complexity. It's not enough for Mark to say, Herod is a bad guy. The gospel writer takes great pains to show all these other layers of Herod's personality.

The result is that I begin to recognize Herod in myself--the man who is easily swayed by the opinions of others, who is hesitant to speak out against the sin of society because I am afraid of how it might effect my relationships with those closest to me, the man who is attracted to the glitter of the culture whose ambition might lead me to step or mistreat others. It might be that the gospel writer in giving this whole picture of Herod, invites me to see the whole picture of myself. I begin to see the Herod in me that is inconvenienced by the truth, that is more bothered than welcoming and accepting of the John the Baptists who show up in my life. I begin to see the Herod in me that is shocked and horrified to learn of my involvement in the injustice of the world, and yet takes an easy way. I see the Herod in myself that is outraged by the injustices committed by own country by imprisoning innocents in Guantanamo Bay, and yet would rather just forget about them or make excuses for fear of appearing unpatriotic. I begin to see the Herod in myself that hears of the rise of illegal settlements of Israelis into the Palestinian lands, and yet I am so hesitant to speak of act for fear of be accused of betraying my Jewish friends, even when its Israel's own law that is being violated. And I begin to see the Herod in myself when approached by someone whose need is so great, and yet I am tempted to push them away without so much an offer of a prayer. I begin to see the Herod in myself when I roll my eyes in annoyance at someone who's theological or political leanings may be different from my own, effectively cutting off any further conversation.

And when I encounter that Herod in myself, which I suspect is Mark's point, I come to a deeper awareness of how much I need to hear John the Baptist's call to turn toward the power of God to turn my life around, and I come to a more sharp awareness of how only God's power can free me from the sin that enslaves me. But but then again, like Augustine used to say, perhaps not yet.

When one thinks about it, there is not much difference between a Bad Guy like Herod, and a Saint like Paul. Both are responsible for the suffering and even death of those whom inconvenienced them, and yet it is Paul who comes to see in Christ, he can become a new creation. It's in the light of Christ's resurrection, that Paul can admit his own powerless to sin and his own need to be gathered up into the Risen Body of Christ. And so Paul lays out hope even for one like Herod, just like he himself can to see a new design for his life:

In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. 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, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

You've heard me cite how the powerful anglican preacher Austin Ferrar once summarized Mark's gospel in three lines: God gives you everything. Give everything to God. You can't. But there is a fourth line, even for the Herod and the Saul's that dwell within us and among us. But you can in Christ, whose power can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, and in whom we are given the power of the resurrection, a power by which we can forgive just as Christ has forgiven us.