**Mark 6:14-29 July 11, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, the 6th chapter of Mark here re-reading these words. “But when Herod heard of it, (it being that Jesus’ name had become known through the miraculous works he had done) he said ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The saying goes “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” and we find a woman in our Gospel lesson today who has been scorned, upset, or even to use a word from our Gospel lesson last week, offended by John the Baptist. Herodias, the wife of King Herod, the former wife of Herod’s brother Philip, as Mark puts it in verse 19, “had a grudge against John the Baptist, and wanted to put him to death”. Now that sounds like a woman who has been scorned, a woman who has been sinned against and must certainly have a good reason to be so upset. But when we look through our text, and we look at what John the Baptist had done, we find that his greatest offense, the thing that had caused this grudge to be created, the thing that had created this feud between him and Herodias, was that he simply had told King Herod, her new husband, the truth. John the Baptist had told Herod something that I’m sure Herod already knew, that even Herodias knew, but that they both had chosen to ignore. It wasn’t right that Herod married his brother’s wife. They had sinned and done evil in the sight of the Lord.

John was persecuted for speaking the truth about God’s Law and about God’s Word. Which shouldn’t surprise any of us, for we don’t always see the prophets being treated with respect and admiration for speaking in God’s place to the nations. Just last week in our Epistle lesson, Paul spoke about the hardships that he faced as he went out and proclaimed the Gospel. Hear again his words, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” The history of the Church tells us of the disciples who boldly proclaimed Christ and Him crucified, and how they were martyred and killed. The symbols on the altar are reminders of this. John the Baptist is an example of this. John was the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the one who famously prepared the royal highway, who went out with a message of repent and believe for the kingdom of heaven was near. He was the one who took the “lumps” so to speak of beginning this ministry, he was the one who was put in jail and persecuted, and in a sense we would expect to find him with Jesus throughout Christ’s ministry. We would almost expect to find him in the spot that Peter takes as the great confessor of who Christ is, the one who boldly stands up for Jesus in the Garden, the one who claims that he would never deny Christ. But John isn’t there, he doesn’t get to see the miraculous feeding of the 5000, he’s not present when Christ calms the storm or walks on water. He doesn’t get to see the cross, or behold Jesus at the empty tomb. Instead John’s ministry begins in the Jordan and in the wilderness, and ends in a dingy jail cell, surrounded by prisoners, and finally at the end of an executioner’s blade.

And his crime? Speaking the truth. In this instance speaking the truth of the ruler’s sin, and the sin of the ruler’s wife. And why does John scandalize this woman? Why does he provoke her? Why does he speak ill of her and call her out on marrying her husband’s brother? Because it is the truth. Because he was calling sin, sin. Because he was speaking on behalf of God as God’s prophet, and not on his own opinion. It would have been easier for John to just keep his mouth shut, and I’m sure that temptation came upon him. It’s one thing to call out sin on the weak or powerless in society, it’s another to call out the one who has authority to put you in prison for no reason at all. I’m sure he faced the temptation to just stay quiet and ignore what had happened because of who was involved, to not call out this powerful ruler, to not provoke someone who had the authority to put him to death, but he spoke the truth. He was a faithful man, and a faithful follower of God.

Which is completely opposite of Herod. Who was a man in a powerful position, a man of great authority, yet when we look at this particular lesson we learn was a man who behaved as a coward, and as a very weak person. This text doesn’t paint him out to be an evil person, as Herodias seems to be, someone who had an agenda in all that she did and held a grudge against John to kill him. Herod seems to have a healthy amount of fear in what John says, that John perhaps is speaking the truth to him about the sins he’s done against his brother and in his marriage. He fears John, and doesn’t want to kill him, but his weakness is shown in his pride. For at the feast that he throws, surrounded by the nobles, and military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee, after I’m sure much wine, music, feasting and dancing girls, he hastily makes a bold claim. That a dancing girl can have whatever she wants. And in his foolishness he’s backed into a corner, in front of all these important people when that dancing girl asks for the head of John the Baptist. Now he has to make a decision, go back on his word in front of everyone and look weak, or take the easy way out, and kill an innocent man for his mistake. We know what he chose to do. He took the easy way out, he made the simple choice and the one that would bring him the most comfort in a difficult situation.

The opposite of John’s choice. And faced with the same situations in our own lives, which do we choose? The easy choice? Or the hard one? The choice that will lead to proclaiming the truth of what God’s Word says for the benefit of our neighbor to bring them to repentance, or the truth of what our own hearts want to hear? This particular Gospel is unique in that it focuses solely on what happens to John the Baptist and doesn’t speak much about Jesus at all. But if I were to sum it up to you by saying that a man was persecuted for speaking the truth about marriage by the governing authorities, it may not sound like an event that took place thousands of years ago. It may sound like a present day headline, as speaking the truth about marriage can land you into serious trouble. It can certainly scorn other people, and have them hold grudges against you. It may someday get you in trouble with the authorities and thrown into jail. It may even lead to you being killed. That’s the world we live in today, a world that is scorned, scandalized, and offended by the truth of God’s Word and what it says.

But before we go on and on pointing the finger at what everyone does to avoid hearing the truth of God’s Word and how it calls them to repentance, we must look in the mirror. We must hear what our muzzled conscience has been trying to tell us in our own lives. We must hear what God’s Word says about the way we live. We must recognize that in our own lives we choose the easy way, rather than the hard way. That we neglect speaking the truth to others, and even neglect speaking it to ourselves, and instead remain silent. We choose comfort over our own responsibility. We are weak and cowardly, just as Herod was.

John the Baptist’s story is a reminder to all of us that life as a Christian doesn’t always mean that we will have the happiest of endings here on Earth. But his story does bring the hope and comfort of knowing that John remained faithful even to death. That John didn’t give in to the temptations of this world and Satan himself to renounce his faith in Jesus Christ. And it is that faith, and that promise of Jesus that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life, that is our comfort in this world. For we know, as it says in Revelation, that to those who are faithful even unto death, they are given the crown of life. That to those who are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, they are seen in the eyes of God with the same perfection that Jesus achieved by living a perfect life on this earth.

And that nothing can take away the love that Jesus Christ our Lord has for us. Nothing can scandalize, or offend, or scorn Jesus Christ and God our Heavenly Father so badly that he will hold a grudge against us and turn his back on us. He has promised to remain with us, no matter what we face in our lives, whether it be comfort, or pain. Whether it be praise or persecution. He is there, right next to us, comforting us in His Word, and giving us the confidence to go out into this world and speak the truth to those we know, we love, and even those we haven’t even met yet, which is our responsibility as His children.

For after John was beheaded and Jesus’ name grew there was a lot of confusion about what it meant, even with some saying that John had been raised from the dead. And while Herod himself wasn’t a theologian and didn’t understand the implications of what Jesus was doing at that time, when he says “John, whom I beheaded has been raised.” He is absolutely right. For John didn’t stay dead, buried in this earth and forgotten by God. He was raised from death into an eternal life. A life won for him on the cross. A life given to him as a gift. A life that we see created in all those who have drowned and die to sin and arise a new child of God. For we are made God’s own children through the work of the Holy Spirit in the water and the Word. Our salvation is given as a gift, just as it is to all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus, who were as our epistle lesson states predestined according to the purpose of him, who works all things according to the counsel of his will. And we, as members of this Holy Christian Church, this big C church, this universal Church all will receive the inheritance promised to those who are elected and called to faith.

May the life that God has created in all of us, give us the strength to boldly confess Christ in the face of persecution. May the truth of God’s Word be a light for our path as we take his truth out into this world and in love speak the truth to those around us. And may we always find comfort in the works of Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, who died for the martyrs, who died for His children, and who ultimately died for you, so that when death comes for you, as it did for John, you will rise again.

Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.