

Mark 6:14-29

12 July 09 **Mercy and Truth**

“Power”

Power can be a dangerous thing. Power can also be a wonderful tool for getting good stuff done. It seems to me that most adult human beings consciously or unconsciously seek for themselves power and authority and the recognition that comes with them. We do it at work, looking for a promotion, partly for financial reasons, but also partly because power and the recognition that comes with it feels really good. We do it at home sometimes, usually with unfortunate results. In the public square, in volunteer organizations, and in the church we seek power for good motives and for poor.

Power can be a dangerous thing. Power can also be a wonderful tool for getting good stuff done. I myself have an ambivalent relationship to power. On the one hand I really enjoy chairing the synod's candidacy committee. It's very time consuming. But it's also important, because we determine who gets approved for ordination or commissioning and who doesn't. We have a responsibility both to the candidates and to the whole church. Power can be a tool for getting good stuff done in this world.

On the other hand, one of the reasons I left Overland Park is that I judged it would be too easy to get into a suburban church power and prestige competition. Power can be a dangerous thing.

We see how dangerous it can be in the stories of what happened to the prophets Amos and John the Baptist. In the first reading King Amaziah is disturbed when he hears what the prophet Amos has to say. Now, when we use the word “prophet” we normally are thinking of someone who foretells the future. But that's not what a prophet did in Israel. The task of the prophet was to speak the Word of the LORD. That's what Amos does, and that's why Amaziah is so upset. You see, if Amos had been speaking on his

own, he could have been ignored. Who really cares what a raving lunatic has to say? But Amaziah knew better. Amaziah knew that Amos was speaking God's Word. And he knew that God's Word is powerful and that ignoring it doesn't make it go away. So he tries to get *Amos* to go away and take his prophecy with him so that this all powerful Word of the LORD which makes him so uncomfortable is no longer among his people. Amos speaks truth to power, and power doesn't like it. Amos is sent packing. Not that that stops him. The powerful word of God which he spoke is still with us.

John the Baptist also speaks truth to power. Only he pays a much higher price. John made it crystal clear that it was just plain wrong for Herod to take his half-brother Philip's wife. Her name was Herodias. I just think that the way King Herod is portrayed in this story is really interesting. On the one hand, he and Herodias are none too pleased by what John says. On the other hand, Herod recognizes that John is a prophet; he speaks the Word of God. Herod is fascinated by him and likes to listen to him. But Herod is trapped by his power and keeps John in prison.

And then there's this story read this morning. Herod makes a foolish promise to his daughter, and he does it in front of witnesses. And when his daughter says she wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter, Herod knows this is a request he should not grant. But he is trapped by his power. He can do what he knows is wrong. Or he can look weak in front of his courtiers and let the word spread that he is frightened by the prophet. Power is a dangerous thing, especially to those who wield it.

Herod beheads John. This does not make the Word of God which John spoke go away. No, as soon as this cephalic separation takes place, Herod hears of the words and ministry of Jesus. And he concludes that John the baptizer had come back from the dead and that his word had not been silenced.

Power is not only dangerous, it's also more limited than we might

think. I don't want to minimize the extent of power; it did get John the Baptist killed. But as Gandhi could tell you, it definitely has its limits. The truth, eventually, is more powerful. The Word of Truth, the Word of God is more powerful.

What this says to us is that we cannot control God's Word. No matter how powerful we are, we cannot keep it on a leash as if it were a pet. God's Word remains a wild animal. It does what it wills and defeats our efforts to silence it. It speaks words of love and forgiveness both to us and to people who are not like us. It speaks words of judgement that call us back to a right relationship with God and with each other, including those who are not like us. It calls us out of our comfort zone and into the mission zone. It speaks truth to power.

Looking out on you this morning, I don't see many people that the world would regard as important or powerful. And yet the Word of God is active here, subverting the old world and creating a new one, right here, through you, moving you to speak truth to power. Every time you speak up for love in the face of the power of hate, you are speaking truth to power. Every time you tell the truth about injustice and act to subvert it, you are calling power to repentance. Every time you do that, you are exercising a different kind of power, the power of God in Christ Jesus, the flesh and blood Word of God. This is a very different kind of power. It is one that is stronger than death. And there is nothing that can defeat it.

So as we at Living Water move forward in our mission, let us let our mission be centered around and grounded in the Gospel of forgiveness through the cross of Christ. Let us let God's Word work among us. As we shape our mission, let us listen to what God is calling us to be. Let us listen to what God is calling us to do. Let us let God's Word speak truth to us. And let us use *its* power.