

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/12/2009, Pentecost 6B
Mark 6:14-29
Almost Persuaded

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:20, RSV)

Herod here is kin in spirit to another ruler mentioned later in the New Testament -- King Agrippa who heard the case of St. Paul. Agrippa permitted Paul to speak, and that apostle gave moving testimony to our Lord Jesus. Afterwards, King Agrippa gave his famous reply. In the old King James Version, it is phrased this way:

²⁸Then Agrippa said unto Paul, *Almost* thou persuadest me to be a Christian. (Acts 26:28, KJV)

What a heartrending adverb that is: *Almost*! The soul is close to safety, but alas, falls short. The wandering sheep has wandered close to its Good Shepherd, the Prodigal Son has commenced his way back home, but will they make it? Peter has trailed on behind his Master all the way into the palace of the high priest. Good enough. But will he endure? Will he remain true to Jesus? Or, rather, will he wilt before the questions of a maid, so that the best that can be said of Peter is that he *almost* followed Jesus to the cross, *almost* denied him not, *almost* fled not.

I mean to give credit to Herod in this sermon¹ -- at least a good amount of credit. It's not a natural thing for me to do. Over the years, I have preached many a sermon criticizing Herod for his impious relationship with Herodias, his succumbing to the spell of the dancing girl, the recklessness of his offer to her, his cowardice in refusing her brutal request for the head of John the Baptist, and for his cruel execution of that holy man. Yes, there has been much to criticize in the man, yet in this sermon I want to speak of Herod with some sympathy. I believe there is much to admire in him. Yet, for all that, in the end I think you will find that I want no Herods in this congregation. I do not want

¹ I have been inspired along these lines by Spurgeon's fine sermon "John and Herod," though I take things in my own direction.

you *almost* to be Christ's man, *almost* to be Christ's woman, but rather to be the real thing!

To begin my praise of Herod I note that he protected John -- well, he *almost* protected him. That is, he protected John for a good long stretch till in a burst of foolishness and cowardice he had the man beheaded. Still, for a while, Herod did well. He safeguarded his prisoner, John the Baptist. He "kept him safe." (Mark 6:20, RSV) Safe from whom? Safe from Herod's wife! And that was no mean feat. John faced an implacable foe, and, sorry for him, that foe was not some stranger, not some lowly person in the countryside, but Herod's own wife. She was furious with John. The King James Version uses the quaint word "quarrel" to explain her attitude toward John:

¹⁸For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. ¹⁹Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not. (Mark 6:18-19, KJV)

She could not kill John, at least for a while, but that did not prevent her from pressuring her husband. It's one thing if some peasant off yonder is calling for John's death; it's something much different and much more pressing if your wife is calling for the death. Yet, Herod, bless him, withstood the wishes of his wife and kept John safe. *Almost* safe. In the end, Herod failed. But at least, he started off well.

Second, I like Herod because he heard John, an inconvenient preacher. In a way, Herod went to church when he sat before John. He placed himself in the presence of the Word of God. He said to himself, "Now here is a serious preacher. He pulls no punches. He is rough and plain speaking. Why, I've heardtall that he blasted people in the past -- called them a 'generation of vipers.' (Matthew 3:7) He wears no soft raiment, but a garment of scratchy camel hair. His diet is not delicate. He seems to me to be an honest man -- a man worth listening to." And I think that speaks well of Herod, that he chose a preacher who loved the opinion of God more than the opinion of men.

There is true humility in Herod that he should bother to listen to a prisoner. It was very fine that Herod protected John. It is finer still that he bothered to go down to the prison cell, or summoned the prisoner and his rags up into his elegant study to hear the man preach. It shows a love of the truth in Herod's soul that he should bother to listen to John the Baptist.

Furthermore, Herod listened to John even when he was "perplexed" by the preaching of John. When the going got rough, when John was preaching things that made no sense to Herod or were even troubling for the man, still Herod heard John. Indeed, the Bible says that Herod was glad to hear John:

When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:20, RSV)

What had gotten John in such trouble in the first place? His preaching against the impious domestic arrangements of Herod Antipas. Herod had divorced his first wife and wooed away the wife of his half brother. The whole thing smacked of adultery and incest, and it is not likely that John the Baptist gave up his complaints about it. John could be counted on to preach the holy law of God, and John had pointed that holy law right at Herod:

John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.

Inconvenient preaching, I'd say, perplexing for Herod, probably even offensive to the man, yet he gladly heard John.

Do you see what I mean about Herod? There was a kind of nobility of soul about him such that he was *almost* God's man.

However, as Jesus taught, to whom much is given, much is required. (Luke 12:48) Herod's gifts of power, authority, even nobility of soul were not to be squandered on a dancing girl. When Herodias demanded the head of John the Baptist, Herod had arrived at his spiritual crisis. Would he prove to be a man who had profited from his listening to John and his preaching, or would he let these spiritual matters slide? Would he be God's man or would he be *almost* God's man but a man who in the end yielded to sin at the cost of a human life?

Well, the story is not a good one. Herod twisted in the wind for a while, but soon the guard was returning to the banquet hall with the bloody head of John the Baptist on the platter for the girl and her hard mother.

Now, in this morning's Gospel Lesson, some time has passed, and we find Herod to have a haunted conscience. He hears the news about the preaching and healing mission of the Twelve. He knows of their master, Jesus, and he cannot keep himself from thinking of John:

"John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (Mark 6:16, RSV)

By the time, we encounter Herod Antipas again, he has become a shallow person, fading from the pages of history except for his sins. I think that the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, from the 1970s, corrected portrays the man as a buffoon.

⁸And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

⁹Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing. ¹⁰And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused him. ¹¹And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate. (Luke 23:8-11, KJV)

The thing that ailed Herod was that he preferred the preacher to the Word preached. The Bible says that Herod “gladly heard” John, yet in hearing John, he failed to hear John’s God. Forget the preacher, along with whatever charm or sternness he or she might have. Forget the preacher and ask yourself the question, “Is this the Word of God?” If so, then cling to it for dear life’s sake.

You have no doubt heard the saying of the American writer John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)² about sad words:

For all sad words of tongue and pen, The saddest are these, “It might have been.”

But in today’s story, I think we have met the match of them:

²⁸Then Agrippa said unto Paul, *Almost* thou persuadest me to be a Christian. (Acts 26:28, KJV)

“Almost.” It is a word that speaks of half measures, half-heartedness. It was the lukewarm way of Herod Antipas, and in the end, it meant the squandering of a life -- indeed, two lives: the life of John the Baptist and the life of Herod himself.

You know what it means to “go for it!” You know what it means to “put your hand to the plough and not look back.”(Luke 9:62) You know what it means to do something *passionately*, not by half measures, but with your whole heart.

That was the manner of Jesus Christ. He saw you in need, and he went for it! He went to your rescue, all the way to that old rugged cross.

There is no mathematical proof I can give you for what I am urging. All I can do is to testify to you that Jesus lived this whole-hearted way, and many millions of people have tried to do the same, following on after him. And when grey hairs have come to adorn their heads, they have regretted nothing of their walk with him except, perhaps, that they did not walk even more passionately with him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Greenleaf_Whittier