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Friendship United Church  
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Mark 6: 14-29

The story of John the Baptist is not a pleasant one. In fact it is a story that depicts a violent culture, a time when disturbing the status quo could get you killed. Although there are still parts of the world today who behave this way it is not a way of life that we are accustomed to. But this is a historical story that still speaks to us today.

Herod Antipas was the ruler of the time. He was one of many Herods so it may be a bit confusing. This Herod was not the Herod that had all of the children of Bethlehem slain, that was Herod the Great a relative of Herod Antipas. He also was not the Herod who executed James, John's brother that was Herod Agrippa 1. One might get the impression that all these Herods are alike and why not, after all they all seem to have used their power in self-serving ways. Perhaps it ran in the family. They were all politicians in extremely powerful positions. Whatever they asked of their servants, their armies, their advisors, was accomplished.

Knowing this it should be no surprise that at the request of his daughter, Herod would complete what was asked. It was his birthday party and all the invited guests, the highest of the high, the elite of the city, the others in power heard his promise to give her whatever she asks, even half of his wealth. What a promise! He would have to follow through regardless of the request or his ability to show his power could be compromised.

Such power indeed; such power held by one man.

Some of you may know of Lord Acton, who may be best known for his quote about power. He said, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He also said this, "And remember, where you have a concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control. History has proven that."

Is Herod such a gangster; with the concentration of power in his hands alone? To most of the people of his time the answer might be yes depending on their ability to understand power as we understand it. In hind sight we could say yes. It is easy for us to see the gangster-like activities of the rulers in ancient times. Even today we see gangster-type activities around the world. People in power, wielding their power, using their power because they can. South Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States, Canada, China. Come to think of it is there a country anywhere that does not exhibit it's power in some form, on the world stage?

The Bible is based on one area of the world. The people then didn't know the rest of the world existed; hard for us to fathom such a thing. Their power was contained to some degree to only those in their area, not the entire world as we know it, but that

doesn't really matter. What matters is the fact that one man held so much power that he could serve up the head of another man on a platter merely because it was asked for by a young girl. Who by the way was only doing what her mother asked her to do. John the Baptist's head was not her idea. She might rather have had a new dress or a pony but in her childlike way she turns to her mother and says, what should I ask for? It is said that the addition of the head on a platter was hers. Perhaps her addition of the head served on a platter was her attempt to stop her father from killing him; thinking this was such a grotesque request he would have to deny it. But that isn't the way it worked in ancient times. The word of the ruler held the most power of all; even more than the power of God!

Oh now wait a minute; more powerful than God? It serves us well when we hear about these ancient rulers to know some of their history. This Herod had replaced the Torah with his rule, his law; to him God held little power; but he was intrigued by John the Baptist and what he had to say. He was intrigued that John the Baptist would speak out so adamantly against Herod's way of ruling and the decisions he made like taking his brother's wife while his brother was still alive. John spoke out against this illegal act without fear of repercussion.

Herod saw something in John the Baptist that intrigued him. John also was a man of power, but his power was different; his power was in his voice, in the things he said about God and the judgment of God. Herod was intrigued by John's prophesy and willingness to speak out against him. But Herod's power would win out. John would be killed and once again governmental violence would win; or would it?

So what has this story to do with the teachings of Jesus and the miracles of Jesus that we have been reading so far in Mark? Mark uses this story to forewarn the reader of things to come. To prepare us for what happens to those who speak out against the rule of the day.

This violent take of John the Baptist invites us to explore our own commitment to speaking the truth about God and the new Dominion God has created. It dares us to stand firm in our belief; to have faith in an unseen God; To endure whatever life throws at us for the sake of something better.

It also tells us that sometimes personal respect is easily abandoned when circumstances warrant it. Sometimes we feel we are in with the right crowd and then suddenly we are challenged with something we don't believe in. Do we go with the crowd or stand our ground?

Herod went with the crowd. Personally he might rather have let John live and continued to be fascinated by him but the pressure to prove his power, to keep his word, was imminent, his back was against the wall; if he did not kill John he would be perceived as weak and ineffective, and so Herod went with the crowd.

It seems that our world goes with the crowd most of the time. The United Church of Canada does not always go with the crowd. Our policies on controversial issues have led the way for many years. Our ministers and congregations have stood up against injustices in a variety of ways. We speak out against war; we respond publically to environmental issues; we advocate for people in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries for medical supplies and clean water; we stand with people in the Philippines and Haiti against dictatorship and military bullying and sometimes our people pay with their lives.

Our Mission and Service people are committed to reaching out to parts of the world that struggle for free speech and fair treatment. Here in Canada our church works hard to keep a presence in rural communities and to repair the damage done to our native people. We work hard to ensure that the boundaries of gender, orientation, race, economics or culture set up by the world are not the boundaries of a loving God.

This is what the gospel is referring to. Jesus asked us to join a new kingdom; one that would speak out, one that would risk all for those who have little; one that would bring love and joy rather than fear and violence. A kingdom open to everyone who would join it. By being and calling ourselves Christians we have said yes to this new world.

Calling ourselves Christian is not a natural way of being. We are not Christian as a by-product of being Canadian; in fact many Canadians are not Christian at all and we shouldn't assume that we all are. It is a choice we have made. It is a way of living that puts us outside the norm. It reminds us that we have a duty to uphold. By claiming ourselves as Christians we are joining an active movement. Jesus is not simply asking for our hearts and souls, he is asking us to join a movement that mixes religion and politics by speaking out against injustice.

Jesus was a revolutionary according to those who crucified him. He was placed between two other revolutionaries for crucifixion. In Greek the word thief can be translated to mean revolutionary and crucifixion was used to send a message to the people of what happens to revolutionaries.

Today we confuse the mix of religion and politics. We get caught up in the political party's promises and propaganda. We have separated religion and state thinking this has solved the problem and yet it seems that no matter how congenial the conversation, no matter how many concessions we win from politics the bottom line for the way the world congregates and unifies people is violence. Perhaps we are not serving heads on platters but we continue to create and participate in war and other acts of violence against one another and our world.

We have a duty of care given to us through Jesus. For those of us who have decided that the United Church of Canada is where we can do our best discipleship this duty is reflected through our New Creed. We are not alone, we live in God's world. In fact let us turn to page 918 in VU and recommit ourselves to this promise to one another and to God.

We are not alone,  
We live in Gods world

We believe in God who has created and is creating,  
Who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,  
To reconcile and make new,  
Who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:  
To celebrate god's presence,  
To live with respect in Creation,  
To love and serve others,  
To seek justice and resist evil,  
To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.