

July 12, 2009  
Lectionary 15b  
Mark 6:14–29  
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You've no doubt heard, or used, the saying, "Stick your neck out." It's an idiom that refers to taking a risk, exposing oneself to criticism, going against the powers that be, often to challenge a person or change a situation. There are two different theories about the origin of this phrase.

One refers to a turtle who must stick her neck out of her shell. When a turtle does stick her neck out, she becomes more vulnerable to predators. But a turtle must leave the safe haven of its shell to eat...to live; which leads to another quote, "A turtle only makes progress when he sticks his head out."

Another theory about the origin of the phrase "sticking your neck out" is thought to have originated about 60 years ago and is based on the barnyard chicken that was laid on the chopping block with its neck stretched out before it was beheaded with an ax.

Okay, so you probably know where I'm going with this one...why bring up the gruesome details of butchering chickens in a sermon? More curiously, why include the story of John the Baptist's gruesome murder in the Sunday morning readings? Or, as I asked myself, you might ask "Why is Pastor Mueller on vacation whenever this text comes up in the lectionary?"

Seriously, what's up with this text? Throughout history, people have been fascinated by this horrific tale. It's kind of like a biblical soap opera with extra-marital affairs, extravagant parties, suspense and even death. And it was John's prophetic voice that got him into trouble. John spoke the truth when no one else dared.

John confronted the Roman leader, Herod, about his attempt to consolidate power through a politically advantageous marriage. Herod put aside his legitimate wife to marry his half-niece, Herodias, the daughter of one of his half brothers and the ex-wife of another brother. The new wife didn't like what John, the prophet, spoke, so she had him thrown in prison.

While John is in prison, Herod throws an extravagant birthday party for himself. After the drinking and the dancing, Herod promises his wife's daughter anything she wants, even saying he would give to her half of his entire kingdom if she wanted it. Instead she comes back after talking with her mother and asks for the head of John the Baptist.

What on earth is this awful story doing here? One possibility is that it explains who Jesus is—the one whose way is prepared by John in life and death. Their lives parallel one another. John has a message and dedicated disciples; Jesus' ministry follows a similar pattern. The innocent John is killed by powerful people who are threatened by his truth telling. Jesus, too, dies at the hands of an anxious political authority. Herod knows that John is not deserving of death; Pilate tries to derail Jesus' execution. John's followers come to take his body to a tomb; there is a tomb waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem as well. For both, master and disciple, speaking truth to power led to danger, even death.

There is real danger in naming what is wrong in the world and trying to change it. Even the way the story is placed in the book of Mark makes the point. It's sandwiched right in the middle of the sending of the 12. Just before John's beheading, Jesus sends the 12 out to teach, preach and heal with nothing to sustain them but their faith. After the gruesome platter is brought into the banquet, the disciples return to Jesus to report their success. Good and successful ministry, it seems, happens right alongside violent opposition. It's enough to make one choose a safer course in life than being a disciple of Christ.

And that's the other reason for the story. It just might be that some of us who try to follow Christ have been following too safe a course, sitting in mighty comfortable seats at the banquet, so much so that we need this awful story to help us examine how we're following the One whose way was full of danger and whose final destination was a cross.

What might it mean for us to step forward in this moment in prophetic ministry? Together, as part of this congregation, we act boldly in a variety of ways to bring the healing power of God's love to a broken world. Through financial gifts and volunteer services with the Lakeview Pantry we provide food for hungry people in the Lakeview neighborhood, and we work to alleviate hunger throughout the world with our support of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Our congregation has a strong reputation for welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people into the full life of our congregation, even when many congregations throughout the church have an unofficial- closed door policy. Holy Trinity has two members who faithfully participate in the anti-racism task force for the synod, assisting us all to grow in our awareness of white privilege and our advocacy against racism.

All of this is good faithful ministry, but none of it is very risky. The story of John's beheading is shocking, and it's meant to be--to shock us out of complacency in a faith that comes at little or no cost. Relatively few Christians (thankfully) are called to be martyrs. But all of us who follow Christ are called to confront the wrong we see around us, and confrontation is never comfortable. To pay that price is to stand with many who followed the path that John prepared for the One who came after him.

My friends, this is not only a shocking story, it's a wake-up call. It calls us to do more than change the world with our money and our welcome. Is John's courage enough to embolden us to speak up and act out? This story invites us to stick our necks out. Perhaps to write that letter to government officials and newspapers about health care for everyone, food and homes for every family. It urges us to challenge others when racist, sexist or homophobic comments are made, and to challenge the institutions and relationships that keep the isms alive and well. Often, this means taking on an institution or system that's foundational to our own wellbeing—a government, a church, a place of employment. Perhaps most risky of all, is that following in the footsteps of Jesus and John may mean challenging someone or something we care deeply about. Because as you and I know, standing up for a cause, a passion, a belief, a person, can come at great cost, great sacrifice. John's prophetic voice got him into trouble, and it could be that our voices will get us into trouble, too. But there just might be some things, in faith, that are worth sticking our neck out for.

We have been called to go forth into the world and bear witness to the healing power of God's love. Inspired by the prophetic ministries of Amos, John and Jesus, we bear witness in word and deed. And we remember that with each step of the way, we will find Christ in our midst, who breathes the Spirit upon all his disciples. We *are* ready for this mission, whether we know it or not.