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The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10), Year B
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Mark 6:14-29
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

“When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

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

As some of you know I spent the better part of the past two weeks in Austin, Texas at the 79th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, our governing body that meets once every three years. Filled with hearings, committee meetings, legislative sessions, and worship services, General Convention is an exciting and exhausting experience. As a first-time attendee, I tried to take in all of the experiences General Convention offers. Surely one of the most unique opportunities was a revival held last Saturday evening. Some of you may be surprised to hear that the Episcopal Church does revivals; believe me I was too. An estimated 2,500 people gathered at a venue near the Austin Convention Center to join in song and prayer and to hear our Presiding Bishop preach in his characteristically energizing style about the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Bishop Curry passionately preached about God’s intention for us to have life and to have it abundantly, as Jesus says in the gospel according to John. Thousands of Episcopalians were excited and deeply joyful about the good news of God’s love, and the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable.

As exciting as the evening was, my experience was deeply affected by an encounter I had just before the start of the revival. As the buses transporting us from the Convention Center arrived at the venue, we were met by a group of protestors from the Westboro Baptist Church. For those who are unfamiliar with this group, Westboro Baptist is widely considered a hate group and is known for its vitriolic hate speech and frequent protesting of a whole host of

organizations and groups of people, especially the LGBTQ community, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and US soldiers and politicians. Though the group calls themselves a ‘church’, it seems to be largely made up of members of the extended family of its late founder, and it has few, if any, connections with other branches of the Christian Church.

I have heard about Westboro Baptist and their extreme hate for many years. I have heard of their protesting at the funerals of slain US soldiers and of their hateful speech against organizations that support LGBTQ rights. I thought I knew what they were about, but I must admit that when I exited that bus and saw the small group of protestors surrounded by police officers, a heaviness settled in my heart. I tried not to read their signs, but my eyes were instinctively drawn to them. I won’t repeat what was written on them, for the language is too foul and hateful to repeat. I tried to put this encounter out of my mind, but despite the excitement and joy of the revival, I still carried that heaviness with me. I struggled to understand what would cause people to hate so much. The question has stuck with me throughout the week, and I’ve continued to ponder the power of hatred. Hatred is like a parasitic force that lodges itself in our hearts and sucks life out of us. It is a powerful energy that distorts and creates a vicious web that draws in and harms others.

The insidious nature of hatred is on full display in today’s gospel passage, which offers us a look into the darker sides of the human heart in the story of the beheading of St. John the Baptist. Though we most often associate John with the season of Advent and his prophetic role in preparing the way for Jesus, today we hear the disturbing yet enthralling story of his beheading by order of King Herod. It begins with Herod ordering that John be arrested and placed in prison by demand of Herodias, his wife. She was actually the wife of Herod’s brother Philip, and John had been telling Herod that it was not lawful or right for him to have his

brother's wife. John was speaking truth to authority and power. He spoke against unjust behavior, and because of that he was placed in prison. It seems that John's prophetic speech bothered Herodias more than Herod. She was enraged and held a deep grudge. She ordered Herod to have him arrested, and she wanted to kill him. A grudge of this intensity has the power to consume and infect the heart.

Though his wife wanted John dead, Herod was not so eager to agree, for he recognized that John was a unique figure. He was a holy and righteous man, and Herod liked to listen to him. There was an energy around John. He was a special person, and Herod knew it even though he feared him and couldn't fully understand him. Herod's fear and Herodias' hatred collide to produce disastrous consequences when Herod holds a banquet for his birthday. It was an elegant and elite affair, with politicians, dignitaries, and other persons of prominence in attendance. There was much food and extravagance, and there was dancing. But this dancing was not elegant; it was exploitative.

The story says that a young girl came and danced for Herod and the gathered dignitaries. Though Mark's gospel describes her as Herod's own daughter named Herodias, the more logical understanding given both later details in this story and the version found in the gospel of Matthew is that she was Herodias' daughter, not Herod's daughter. This young girl comes and dances before Herod and his other male friends. The story tells us the girl 'pleased Herod and his guests.' It takes little imagination to see the sexual exploitation that permeates this scene. Herod is so pleased by what he sees that he offers a rash vow: 'whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' The girl immediately goes to her mother Herodias, the one whose heart is so hardened, so laden with hate, and asks what to request. Herod had promised the young girl anything, even half of his kingdom. The possibilities were endless, but her mother desires

only one thing: the head of John the Baptist. And not just that, she wants his head brought to her on a platter. Can you imagine that given the chance to get anything, even a vast sum of money, you would ask for someone to be brutally murdered and dismembered? Such hatred is difficult for me to imagine.

The young girl is caught in the middle of this exchange, exploited both by Herod and her mother. She goes back to Herod and gives her request, and he is deeply grieved and afraid. Herod is confronted with a dilemma. He does not want to kill John, but he has made a rash vow in front of people of power. To break his promise would show weakness. It would bring into question his authority and his status as a powerful man. So, he does what seems to be the lesser of two evils and orders soldiers to go and kill and behead John. Herod's fear and desire to maintain his power and reputation led him to authorize murder in order to save himself. John is beheaded, and his head is then taken to the girl who then gives it to her mother.

This story is an undeniably difficult one to digest, and there seems to be little good news found in it. People of power get what they want, exploit others in the process, and an innocent man is put to death. It is in many ways a dark and discouraging story, and to fail to acknowledge that fact is to dishonor the story itself. Yet, even amidst so much hatred and brokenness a sliver of light shines through, for the story does not end with Herodias receiving her desired prize. No, it ends by noting that after John was beheaded, word of his death reached his disciples. They must have followed John for a long time, listening to his preaching and following him on his journeys throughout the wilderness. They were his friends, and his death deeply grieved them, in the way that the death of a dear friend breaks our hearts. In the face of this tragedy and injustice, they did the only thing they knew to do. They came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. Though Herod and Herodias had taken John's life from him, his disciples came and lovingly

cared for his body. They gave him a proper burial. They showed him the dignity that is due to any human. It wasn't much. It didn't bring him back to life, but this small act of love testified to a different way of being in the world. John's disciples remind us that even amidst so much hate, love has the power to heal and break the bonds created by such hate.

The story still challenges us, and may remind us of our current world, which can feel like a very dark place where so many hearts are hardened by hatred and fear. It is easy to feel powerless and discouraged, yet it is precisely in those moments when we must remember that love is always stronger than hate. For the gospel doesn't end here. Though he is absent from today's story, Jesus fulfills the way of love shown by John's disciples. We know that John's preaching and ministry prepared the way for the coming of Jesus, but even in his death, John tells of the one greater than him who is to come. Like John, Jesus will be captured by people driven by hatred. He will be arrested, mocked, beaten, and nailed to a cross to die a humiliating death as an innocent man. Like John's disciples, a small group of Jesus' friends will come and take his body and place it in a tomb. But this time death won't have the final word. Christ rises victorious from the grave, trampling down death by his own death. That is our good news, the good news of Christ's victory over death, the victory of love over hatred.

It seems to me that we need to be reminded of this good news frequently, for our world is filled with so much darkness. That happened for me last Saturday night when a group from Westboro Baptist came to Austin, Texas with their characteristic hate to protest the Episcopal Church. In the face of such hatred, we did the only thing we knew to do. We gathered to pray, sing, and give thanks for God's goodness and love. And in doing so their message of hate was drowned out by the love of God. They were imprisoned by their hatred. We were liberated by the good news. We left that place to find the same world, one filled with challenges, brokenness, and

sin. But I think we saw things just a little differently. Our vision was refocused. I was reminded that as Christians we are people of defiant hope- hope in the good news, hope in the power of love over hate. It is our call to stand firm as witnesses to the good news in all that we do, small and great, for the steadfast love of our God endures forever.

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