

Mark 6:14-29

Theme: Where *is* the good news?

The word gospel comes from the Greek word evangel and the word evangel translates into ‘good news.’ Reading this morning’s gospel reading from John, one has to ask; where, exactly, is the good news?

We have King Herod and his leering guests, so pleased with the performance of his step daughter. Then there is the step-daughter—Salome, eager to please her mother. The mother, wife of the king, seeking revenge against John the baptizer, who mostly called the people to return to God, but happened to have called out the king’s wife for her adultery. And the murder—what a gory image, “see what I’ll do to those who cross me?” There couldn’t have been a person in the room who felt safe at the power of this woman to do the outrageous to get revenge.

Because the king was spineless. The historian Josephus tells us that Herod was even a bit enamored of John—visited him in the cell. But he was afraid to cross his wife in front of his illustrious guests. He was a coward, complicit in the death of an innocent man. It’s an ugly story.

Looking at so many perversions of human nature, played out in just a few short verses of Mark, it is hard to find good news here. It is a very dark tale.

But there is another part to this story. The story of fear, anger and sheer callousness. We didn’t read it this morning, but it is still there. The part we haven’t read this morning? A light shines in the darkness.

Against the ugliness of the Roman empire, absolute power corrupted, absolutely, the gospeler John proclaims that there is an alternative. It is called the kingdom of heaven. Get ready to welcome it, he says in the opening verses of his telling of the good news. Jesus is coming to save you from the darkness. Ironically, it is precisely the announcement of this good news that lands the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

There is still plenty of darkness still in the world. In fact, it seems we are in the midst of a pretty dark time in our country. But the Light, as John the gospeler wrote, still shines in the darkness.

So, we must ask, *how* does Jesus save? How does the Light shine in our darkness, in the darkness of these times?

By teaching us, we humans, that there is another way to travel. A way that reclaims our dignity as human beings. What Jesus came to teach us we call the way of love. We might also call it the way of human dignity. We might also call it Light shining in the darkness.

What Jesus teaches is the way of love. That love, the love we practice, as followers of Jesus, it is the light in the darkness. And the good news? The darkness cannot overcome it. Not completely. As long as there is love, there is hope. That's the good news.

Bearing the love of Jesus isn't always simple or easy. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is more than being nice to them, or collecting food for them, or taking their needs seriously. Those are all good things to do, and it probably makes Jesus happy when we do them.

But actually, Jesus asks of us something more.

Sometimes that more means letting our hearts be touched and our spirits troubled. Sometimes it means speaking truth to power.

Sometimes it means being bolder than we're comfortable being. Taking risks. Speaking of things that our friends and family may find uncomfortable to listen to.

Sometimes, because the way of love challenges the behaviors of the corrupt powerful, there is even some danger in walking the way of love that Jesus teaches. John the Baptist. Countless martyrs in the early church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Oscar Romero. Martin Luther King Jr. Jonathan Daniels.

The way of love that Jesus teaches means that sometimes we have to confront the dark forces that operate in our world. And to do that, we have to name them for what they are.

One of the steps in walking the way of love is the willingness to see the darkness and give it a name. John named the unrighteousness of Herod's household. He named the fact that the queen had committed adultery. He named that the king had betrayed his brother, who was once married to the queen.

Today I want to name something that is a part of our current darkness.

On Monday, May 7th attorney general Jeff Sessions announced a change in practice when handling parents who illegally crossed the US border with their children. Crossing the border without a visa changed from being a misdemeanor to being a felony. Adults, including those seeking asylum, instead of being detained for evaluation, were imprisoned.

And this simple change in policy dramatically increased the practice of separating young children from their parents at the border. A policy that had been in place in two previous administrations, but used only in special circumstances, became the routine practice, for all families crossing our borders without the proper papers.

Put aside, for a moment why so many of those parents were coming to our border. Put aside what we know of children as young as a year old being unexpectedly separated from their parents, or the fact that some border agents—not all, but some, told parents that their children were being put up for adoption. Put aside that when this policy change was enacted there was no process in place to track children and parents so that they could be later reunited. Put aside the images of the children in cages we've seen, or the immigration lawyers who have been misled when their clients have been secretly moved to new locations.

Put it all aside so you can listen to this one big truth:

The reason that any of this happened
was to deter parents from bringing their children to our country illegally.

To deter parents, children were traumatized. Intentionally.

Let that sink in for a moment. In order to fulfill a campaign promise, children were knowingly traumatized.

Anyone who knows anything about the psychological development of children knows that they will bear deep, lifelong scars.

In order to punish parents, in order to scare parents, in order to deter illegal border crossings, our country chose to harm innocent children.

That is darkness. Darkness done in our name for questionable reasons and unreasonable desires. I think the question needs to be asked,
is this the kind of country we want to be?

And, because we are students in Jesus way of love (remember what Michael Curry says, if it isn't about love, it isn't about Jesus?) as Christians, we need to take seriously ethos that drives such actions. It isn't love. It is fear that has been generated by lies and it is simple ethnic hatred.

In this midst of times like these, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. It is hard to know what to say, or when to say it, and to whom we can voice our concerns without causing friction in treasured relationships.

But as Christians we can't turn away from what is happening in our country.

An administration that so willingly afflicts harm on innocent children in the name of inflated claims of national security—how do we dare remain silent? If are unwilling to name the sin of using children as human shields, to recognize the perversity of such an action, who are we?

Right now, as Christians, some hard things are asked of us. But don't worry, I doubt anyone will be asking for our heads on a platter.

What is asked of us, I think, is that we have the courage to see what is happening. To sort through the daily chaos of a president who loves to create chaos and to find the bigger picture. Rather than avoiding the stress and discomfort of thinking about something that is complex and ugly, we need to sacrifice some of our own comfort in order to think deeply about what is going on. We need to ask, what does it mean, who are we as a people, if we willingly harm innocent children in order to feel safer in our beds at night?

And we need to call what it is. In the case of family separation, it is intentionally traumatizing children by using them as human shields. That is sick. That is something terrorists do.

But this isn't the only case where this administration has strayed far from the ideals of our founding mothers and fathers. There are many more.

And, as Christians, we are called to suffer the knowledge of them. We are called to do more than wag our fingers or shake our heads. We are called to give these policies names. Greed. Callousness. Deception. Lust for power. Cruelty. Injustice.

And we need to share our concerns with others. Not as a pity fest, but to keep the values that have made us a great nation on the table for discussion.

Not as hand wringing, but as honest conversation about who we want to be as a nation, as individuals, as people of faith. Not to start arguments, but to start conversations that will help to find common ground, common hope, common cause. Today, that is how I believe we need to be the light, the love, of Jesus in this time of political contention.

Jesus came to teach us a way of living that gives dignity and hope to the human race. He came to teach us the way of love--as Bishop Curry likes to say, if it isn't about love, it isn't about Jesus. The teaching is light in the darkness.

In the midst of its darkness, the world needs more light, more love, more Jesus. As the baptized, we are the ones to answer the call. .

Amen