

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

“There is Grace in Disgrace”

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In matters of religion, it is important that we work really hard to say what we mean, so that people understand it, and so I'm going to give you three points to think about, and I'll tell them as they come to me, and at the end of the sermon I'm going to give you a parable. Listen carefully, because I think this is important. Brian Bochnight, United Methodist preacher, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, now retired, told a story in a sermon in a church, so it must be true. It seems a cake-maker took an order for a wedding cake for a couple about to be married. The couple was very religious. Their whole lives were built around the Bible and what it told them, and the wedding and the reception were held in their church, which was a Bible church, and a very religious congregation, and the couple requested that there be Scripture posted on the top of the wedding cake, the noted passage pointed out, 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." The baker misread the order, and when the cake arrived the day of the wedding, the bride and groom posed in front of the wedding cake, and when the pictures came back they were horrified to see " 1 John 4:18 " was just "John 4:18" Different author, different part of the Bible, whole different message. It didn't say, "There is no fear in love, but perfect

love casts out fear." Instead, it read, "For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband."

So important it is that we say what we mean in matters of religion, and today I want to say three things about life, things that happen to us, life happens, some bad things happen. Sometimes we are disgraced by what happens, and when we are disgraced by life, we are apt to react to it, to retaliate, to attack, to go after it, to get back at it. Herodias reacted to a sermon John the Baptist preached. In the sermon, he said Herod was a sinner married to his brother's wife while they were still married. Herodias, the new wife, reacted to this thing. History is a little unclear. The Bible suggests it. Mark reports it. Herodias and Herod, Herodias got Herod to kill the preacher for what the preacher said. Did you ever want to kill a preacher for what a preacher said in a sermon? We're not going to go there. Judas reacted to life. Judas reacted to the sermons Jesus preached, although it isn't exactly sure why. Some think Judas betrayed Jesus because it was part of God's plan, and the arrest and the trial and the crucifixion had to happen so that Jesus could be raised again from the dead. Judas was part of the plan. Some think Judas was evil and betrayed Jesus because he was jealous of Jesus' power and popularity. I don't know which, but I do know this. I'm not aware that anybody ever named their child Judas. Many people consider him a villain like Benedict Arnold or Adolph Hitler or Son of Sam, killer Berkowitz, the Unabomber. I think Judas betrayed Jesus for neither of those reasons. I think he was trying to get Jesus to react to the Pharisees who were always putting him down, and to the Romans who treated the people like slaves in Egypt. I think he was trying to get him to react. Judas acted to get Jesus to react. We all react. We all react in life. Disgraced, we react. Maligned, we'll react. Put down, we'll react.

Someone sent me a list of transmissions between cockpits and towers at various airports. One of them was especially interesting. It was an irate female ground controller, lashing out at a US Air pilot, screaming. "US Air 2771 Where in hell are you going? I told you to turn right onto Charlie taxiway and you turned right on Delta. Stop right there. I know it's difficult for you to tell the difference between C and D, but get it right!" And she continued, "God, you've got everything screwed up now. It'll take forever to sort this thing out. Now, you stay right there and don't you move until I tell you, and expect progressive taxi instructions in about an hour. And I want you to go exactly where I tell you, when I tell you, and how I tell you. Do you get that, US Air?" "Yes ma'am," said the pilot. It got very quiet up in the tower. All the cockpits, silence. Nobody wanted to engage this irate ground controller, until some unknown pilot broke the silence and keyed his microphone asking, "Wasn't I married to you once?"

It doesn't take much to make us feel diminished by life and put down by people. Someone said, "Once I was an incurable optimist. Now I'm cured." We can spend our days looking for ways to lash out at those who have spent their days lashing out at us, but where does that get us? When we are disgraced by life, we will react to it. We will get back to it. But we can't spend our whole lives reacting, getting back, retaliating, because there's a second way we respond to life when it's at its worst. The second point. We can reconcile to it, and sometimes we have to reconcile to it. The second point. Reconcile to it, and get on with it. There comes a time when we move beyond disgrace and reaction

and we begin to reconcile, to get on with it. We have to. Karl Barth, the theologian, called it freedom. He said, "Being free only comes when we can determine the limits and be comfortable with them." There comes a time to reconcile, to give up reacting, to give up getting even, to get on with it. There comes a time in life when we realize that getting even never does. That harboring bad feelings will do nothing but make bad things worse, that hate does not hurt anyone except the one that hates. That retaliation backfires. That the best we can do is to resist, to let it go, to reconcile. Lots of examples. Joseph, after his brother tried to kill him, threw him into slavery. After he'd risen into power in Egypt, when his brothers came back begging for food, he reconciled with it. He stopped the need to react, no longer felt the urge to retaliate. Sometimes it hits us. The race we're running to get even is on a track in a circle. We're getting nowhere, and the anger we carry is a curse that's pulling us down. We can't get even if it means we're never happy, and we can't win when somebody's got to lose. Most important, is what it's doing to us.

I love the story John Killinger tells. There's this orator out on the street, a street speaker, exhorting people on the virtues of Communism, and a crowd is gathered. He says, "Communism can do wonderful things for the world," and in the crowd was this poor fellow in torn blue jeans and tattered shirt and shoes with holes and an old overcoat that he'd found under a bridge. The speaker said to the crowd, "Communism, my friends, will put a new coat on that man." The crowd became silent. "To each according to their need, from each according to their ability. Communism will put a new coat on that man." From the back of the crowd there was a polite soul. He didn't speak with arrogance or rudeness, but he was person of faith, and he believed what he said to be true. And in a soft voice, but one that was heard, he said, "Communism may put a new coat on that man, but Christianity will put a new man in that coat."

It's the function of faith. Tillich called it "the new being." It's what Martin Luther King said, "The ultimate measure of a man or woman is not when we stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but when we stand in times of challenge and controversy." Harold Kushner tells a story in his book *The Lord is My Shepherd*. A boy asks his father, "Daddy, why is the sky blue?" The father answers, "What kind of question is that? It's blue because it's blue." "Daddy, why is the grass green?" "How should I know? Grass is green because that's what color it is. If it weren't green, it wouldn't be grass." "Daddy, do you mind my asking you all these questions?" To which the father responds, "No, go ahead and ask. How else are you going to learn?"

There comes a time in life when you take it as it is. They're going to do what they're going to do, and probably not much more. We reconcile to it. Outside us, things don't change. Inside, what we see determines how we look, and that changes everything. No need to react, no need to get back at it. We take it as it is, and we get on with it as best we can. React, reconcile.

Third point. Realize - We are part of it. Step into it. Perhaps most important of all, we're part of it. We have a role in it. Someone asked the old professor, "What makes coffee sweet, the sugar or the stirring?" The old professor answered, "It's the stirring that makes coffee sweet." The student asked then, "Why do we add sugar?" The old professor

answered, "Because the sugar tells you when to stir." Something has to tell us when to stir. In life we're part of it. We're not all of it, but we're part of it. When we are disgraced, we become agents for God's grace. When we are put down, we know what it is to be lifted up. And others will come to us, and we can help them rise up, because we know. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's book *The Scarlet Letter* we find the story of Hester Prynne. She had an affair. The result was a child. It was a puritanical town. The town made her wear this red letter A, it stood for adultery. That was her disgrace in that village. She wore that letter throughout her life. But then something happened, a realization. Disgrace turned to grace. Hawthorne tells us Hester's scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over and looked upon with awe and reverence. Her wound became her award. Her burden became her blessing. Her shame became her symbol. The letter A, adultery, became the letter A, angel. And people would come and visit Hester and ask for her advice, because people knew the nightmare she had been through and as they were going through theirs, she was someone they could talk to. Hester Prynne moved from disgrace to grace by being part of it, by stepping into it.

After Nathaniel Hawthorn died, they found some manuscripts that he'd written for other stories, and the title of this packet of manuscripts, suggestion for stories, several ideas for books, because the plot was there. A problem was presented, there were villains, there were ethical issues, everything was there except the main character. He could finish his stories when the hero appeared. It isn't a story until the main part's taken, and that's true in your story and mine. We do more than react to it. We can do better than be reconciled to it. We can get back to it. We can realize about it. We can go beyond it. We will want to step into it when we realize we are part of it, and we will move from disgrace to grace because of it.

One of the professors at Iliff School of Theology the United Methodist seminary in Denver is Jane Vennard. Several years ago when I taught a class that was a required class, I had an absolute captive audience, I tried to inflict as much pain as possible. Seeing the students in distress meant I was succeeding in preparing them for the local church. Jane's class met before the class that I had began, and we used the same room. So I would see her students leaving while I and my students were walking into the room, and I noticed that her students were always smiling and laughing, and they had such a pleasant countenance upon their face, and they seemed so happy. I told her once that I thought that seemed unnatural. She was amused at my observation. She wrote a book entitled *Embracing the World*. It's a book about how you move from disgrace to grace, and she tells us in the book that humility does not come from being humiliated by others, or from focus upon our faults, our wounds, or our sins. True humility, she says, develops as we draw closer to God. God's greatness illuminates our shallowness. God's wholeness completes our incompleteness, and recognizing our smallness and dependence on God opens us up to guidance. We are part of it. We are not all of it, but there is a role for us to play. A script for us to read. It was the theologian Kierkegaard who said, "You cannot learn to swim by being suspended from the ceiling by a belt, and in that position reading a book on how to swim. You learn to swim by swimming." We learn to live by living, and we learn to live best by seeing ourselves as part of life, as we live it.

I think of Jimmy Carter and Roselyn, who felt the disgrace of a less-than-stellar presidency. He didn't accomplish what he'd hoped to. And sometimes his critics were cruel. And at times the two of them, after he was not elected for the second term, they turned very bitter. But they realized something in their later years. After they reacted to their disgrace, and they reconciled to it, they became part of life and are to this day revered as supporters of the Habitat for Humanity. They build houses. That changes lives. And they would rather, Jimmy and Roselyn would rather sit in the living room of a Habitat house they built, than the green room of the White House from which they got fired. They were willing to step into it, because they knew it's never too late to start over. Because it's true, no defeat is permanent. And no diagnosis can predict how we'll live our final years, and no diminished capacity is without acquired insight.

The words of Robert Frost haunt us. He said, "Something we were withholding made us weak, until we found out it was ourselves." We must not withhold ourselves from life. We must act. We must realize, step into it. Step into life, to live it. We are part of it. Otherwise, an important part goes missing. So it is when there's disgrace, react to it, get back at it, we will Reconcile with it. Sometimes we have to. It's going to be what it is. Get over it. Resonate with it. Step into it, realize we're part of it. The best it can be.

I end with a parable.

Tower to cockpit: "Flight 702 cleared for takeoff."

From the plane: "United 702. By the way, after we lifted off, we saw some kind of dead animal on the end of the runway."

American Flight 635 cleared for takeoff behind United Flight 702 "Did you copy the report about the dead animal?"

Response from the plane: "American 635, cleared for takeoff. Yes we copied United 702. We've already notified our caterers."

When there's a dead animal on the runway, make a meal. When life brings us the dark chapter, react, reconcile, respond, because the book isn't finished. Because we've got a part in the story.