



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“America’s Crisis of Character?”

Mark 6:14-29

Rev. David K. Groth

July 15, 2012
7th Sunday of Pentecost

Collect of the Day

O Lord, You granted Your prophets strength to resist the temptations of the devil and courage to proclaim repentance. Give us pure hearts and minds to follow Your Son faithfully even into suffering and death; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Is America having a crisis of character? It's a question recently asked by Peggy Noonan in an opinion piece. She notes that in a Gallup poll just 24% of Americans feel the country is heading in the right direction. Twenty-four percent! She writes, "I think more and more people are worried about the American *character* – who we are and what kind of adults we are raising. Noonan points to a list of recent headlines.

- Young people surround a tourist in Baltimore. They beat and pummel him, strip and rob him. Bystanders record it on their phones and you can them laughing.

-Then there are the flash mobs. . . at Mayfair Mall for instance in Brookfield, where groups of teenagers swarm into a store, take everything they can, and run.

"That's just the young, you say. Juvenile delinquency is as old as history. Let's turn to adults" Noonan writes.

-There is the General Services Administration scandal. An agency devoted to governmental efficiency has an extravagant conference in Las Vegas. Executives repeatedly make jokes about how expensive it all is, which again are recorded on smart phones. It does not go over well with tax payers.

-There is the Secret Service scandal. The best of the best protecting the president in a foreign land. A bunch of them are fired for picking up prostitutes. We learn there's a well known saying among the Service: "Wheels up, rings off."

-Noonan points to 16 school teachers in New York who cannot be fired even though they were horrifically inappropriate with their students.

-And American troops in Afghanistan who pose and

smile with the bloody body parts of suicide bombers.

Noonan writes, “In isolation, these stories may sound like the usual sins and scandals, but [together] they seem like something more disturbing . . . *Something seems to be going terribly wrong*” she writes. “*Maybe we have to stop and think about this*” (WSJ April 21-22).

Well, what do you think? Is America suffering a crisis of character, or are we really no worse than the generations before us? Is it just that everything is recorded now on cell phones and so it seems like there’s more of it . . . or are we truly a culture in rapid decline?

For what it’s worth, I know Luther worried out loud about his culture. He took a tour of area towns and what he wrote of them could be written of us: “Good God what wretchedness I beheld! The common people have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for the work. Although the people are supposed to be Christian they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.”

I suspect the folks in first century Galilee also worried about their culture. What did they think when they heard about Herod ordering the beheading of John the Baptist after his daughter-in-law did some kind of dance for him? News of such things got around a little slower in those days, but it got around. People knew what was going on. After all, Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, also knew of this event and had much more to say about it than Mark.

The Herod mentioned in our text is not the Herod who ordered the slaughter of all infant boys in Bethlehem. This, rather, is his son, but that bad apple didn’t fall far from the tree. The Son’s name is Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, a puppet of the Roman Empire. He very much wants Rome to make him a king, but the emperor isn’t very impressed with Antipas. To Herod’s disappointment, he remains “Tetrarch” which is much like our word “governor.”

One day this Herod Antipas visits his brother in Rome by the name of Herod Philip. Philip is married to a strong and attractive woman named Herodias. Antipas obsesses with the woman, his sister-in-law. Eventually he convinces her to

divorce Philip and marry him and one day be Queen of Galilee. Of course, Antipas has to displace his first wife, who happens to be the daughter of the king of Petra. (By the way this peeves the king of Petra and incites him to declare war on Galilee. The armies of Herod take a beating. Many die over this divorce and remarriage, not just John.) In any event, this divorce and remarriage might be legal according to Roman law, and Herod is a Roman citizen, but it doesn't sit well with Jewish law, and Herod governs Jewish lands. So here comes John the Baptist and we just know there's trouble ahead. John is one of those guys who fears no one and always says what he thinks, and what he's thinking now is that Herod is a disgrace and needs to repent. This doesn't sit well with Herod and even less so with his new wife. So John is arrested and thrown into prison.

Normally that would be the end of it and John would rot in Herod's prison until his death, which usually comes pretty fast in a first-century prison. Nevertheless, Herodias, Herod's new wife, thinks imprisonment is way too lenient. She's furious that John would dare judge them. And she's a strong headed one; she's not going to let go of this. She's nursing a grudge and wants John dead. However, she cannot convince her husband. V. 20: "For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." Moreover, "Whenever Herod listened to John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly." Surprisingly Herod secretly admires John and that's why he protecting him from his wife's seething anger.

By the way, these are all real people, living real lives in real places . . . well documented by extra biblical sources. They are wonderfully complex people, people capable of good. They are people like you and me. This is not mythology. This is history. One of the things historians know about Herod is that he loved to throw extravagant parties. And it's at one of these parties, a birthday party for Herod, where John is murdered.

To this party Herod has invited military commanders, his advisors and other leading men from Galilee. There's a lot of testosterone in that room and the booze is flowing and the laughter is loud. Into that comes Herod's beautiful new wife, and her daughter. The Bible doesn't name the daughter, but Josephus tells us her name is Salome. Like her mother, she's

gorgeous and she's young and she knows how to dance. As a birthday gift to her new stepfather Herod, she does her little act for him and his friends. The nature of the dance is left entirely to our imagination. We know, however, that solo dances in that era were normally the art of prostitutes. (These are not nice, pious women.) In any event, the dance very much pleases Antipas and his friends, and in that culture, one of the ways to display your wealth is through extravagant gifts to entertainers. And so Herod says, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." It's an ill-advised oath. One suspects it's fueled by a few too many drinks. His advisors can hardly believe their ears but there's no stopping the boss now because he's on a roll. Herod repeats the oath and ups the ante, promising up to half his kingdom. Surely he's exaggerating, and he knows his daughter in law would never call his bluff, and yet he wants her to know how serious he is about giving her something extravagant. She need only name it. The girl isn't sure what she should ask for, but her mom knows exactly what Salome should ask for . . . the head of John the Baptist on a platter . . . immediately . . . as in now.

Suddenly, Herod doesn't feel so full of mirth, merriness or munificence. He doesn't want to execute John. But all those important men in the room heard his oath, and he can ill afford to lose face before them. So he gives the word and within minutes John's head is brought up to the room for all to see.

Well, what can we learn from all this? Let's go back to the original question. Is America is having a crisis of character. I think so. And yes, Germany has had its share of them as well. And the same could be said of the upper crust in 1st century Galilee . . . and of God's ancient people as they fashioned golden bulls for themselves. Adam and Eve had a crisis of character in the garden. And yes, you and I suffer them too. Whenever temptations come alluring, we have a little crisis, don't we? Sometimes we come out on top; sometimes we cave in. We so struggle with this thing called sin. Jesus said, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Mt. 15:19). That sounds like an on-going crisis of character.

One of the more famous lines from Shakespeare's Hamlet is "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." But

that could describe any country and any culture of any time. And it could also describe you and me. There's something rotten within, something that stinks to high heaven, and it's called sin, which leads to death, and it also stinks literally and figuratively.

What else? Jesus spoke very highly of John. Remember what he said? "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11). Those are high grades from the mouth of Jesus, and yet he chose not to interfere with the course of these events. God doesn't save John. He could have. A well-placed flu bug could have prevented Salome from dancing. Nor does God send his mighty angels to release John from captivity. Nor does he strengthen Herod's resolve to do what is right. Instead, John loses his life because a drunken man makes a hasty oath. It seems so senseless and tragic.

The senseless and tragic can also happen to you and me and those we love. When it does, we are tempted to think God doesn't care, or that he's indifferent or powerless, or angry at us. But I ask, when John was executed did it mean God didn't love John anymore? Did it mean God was angry at John. Did it mean God was powerless or indifferent? Did it mean John didn't have enough faith? Not at all! "Of those born of women none was greater than John." In a fallen world bad things happen to good people, and when they do, often the most faithful response is to hold our tongues. Lamentations 3, "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (v. 25-26). If we must speak of it, we refrain from speculation and confess rather what we know with a certainty: God is just and powerful, merciful and good. He loves us and he will have mercy on us. "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Whatever happened to Herod? Mark tells us that though perplexed by John, Herod always liked listening to him. Similarly, we learn that Herod was long intrigued by *Jesus* and wanted to meet him. And he would get his chance. You recall Pontius Pilate sent Jesus over to Herod. It almost seems as if God was giving Herod another opportunity to take a stand for the good, to defend what was true and right and maybe even learn something from his Son. Of course, Herod failed

miserably. Herod was more interested in seeing a miracle than he was in serving justice, and when Jesus doesn't cooperate, Herod has him roughed up a bit and sends him back to Pilate.

Herod had a once in a lifetime opportunity, and he wasted it. Though highly unlikely for all his pride, Herod could have used that time to learn from Jesus rather than demand a miracle. He could have even confessed his sins, and the angels in heaven would have rejoiced, and Jesus would have forgiven him, and Herod would have received his miracle. So it is with you and me. The greater miracle is that God should love us in spite of our crises in character and forgive us and save us.

The Bible doesn't have much else to say about Herod but Josephus certainly does. He reports that Herodias kept nagging Herod to go to Rome and insist that the emperor make him a king, which would make her a queen. Herod doesn't think it's a good idea. Josephus writes, "He had a suspicion of the trouble he should have at Rome; so he tried to instruct her better. But the more she saw him draw back, the more she pressed him to it" (Josephus, p. 389).

Once again, Herod caves in to her. They set sail for Rome and eventually come before Emperor Caius himself. Long story short: Herod should have listened to his instincts. The emperor not only didn't make him a king, but actually chose to strip him of all his powers and banish him to Gaul. That's where Rome sent those who fell out of favor. We can't be sure, but there's some evidence that is where Pontius Pilate ended up as well and for the same reasons. Those two, the Bible says, became fast friends as they sent Jesus back and forth to one another like a hot potato. One wonders if they ever revisited their handling of John and Jesus.

Every chance you get, take a stand for what is good, what is right and what is true. Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Do justice. Love mercy. And walk humbly with your God. And when you have your own crises in character, and you'll have them every day because that's who we are, run . . . run to the mercy and grace and forgiveness and love of your Savior Jesus. Amen.

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.goodshepherdwi.org

1611 East Main Street

Watertown, WI 53094