

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 11, 2021 (Proper 10, Year B)*

The average American sees a lot of violent images in any given year. Between television, movies, video games, social media, and even the news itself, we are inundated with murder and mayhem. By some counts, the average child will have witnessed 8,000 murders on TV before the end of elementary school. And even if this includes Wile E. Coyote plummeting off a cliff, that's still a lot of death to take in at a very young age.

Think about your own TV watching habits and how many of your favorite shows involve violent crime. From *Murder She Wrote* to *Law & Order*, death sells. I'm really not sure why we're so enamored with these kinds of shows or what this says about us.

And, no, your priest is not immune to this. I like reading murder mysteries and among my favorite TV shows of all time is *The Sopranos* — because who doesn't love a good mob hit? Though, in fairness, if you watch public television, it's hard not to think that every English Vicar spends his free time solving murders on the village green.

But even with all of this violence and the ways we've become desensitized to it, the story of John the Baptist's head on a platter is still shocking. The image is gruesome. It's grisly and it's vivid. You can almost see the blood dripping off John's decapitated head, spilling over the sides of the silver platter, pooling on the floor of the banquet hall.

So, how did we get here? How did we end up in what feels like a particularly dark episode of some Netflix thriller? A bit of background may be helpful. King Herod had John imprisoned, at his wife's urging, because John had criticized him for divorcing his previous wife to marry Herodias. Herodias was actually the widow of Herod's brother. And according to the Law of Moses, this was considered adultery. John, as you might expect from a man who boldly called out hypocrisy on the banks of the River Jordan while inviting his disciples into a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, was unrelenting in his condemnation.

Herod himself might not have cared too much about John's protests over his marriage, but his wife held a major grudge against the man who had so publicly denounced her marriage. It was embarrassing! So imprisonment just wasn't enough for Herodias. She was out for blood. She wanted this impudent prophet permanently silenced.

On the fateful evening in question, Herod was throwing himself a big birthday banquet, and as part of the festivities, his young daughter danced for the king and his guests. Her dancing pleased Herod so much that in his intoxicated state he promised to give her anything she desired, even up to half of his kingdom. After consulting with her mother, Herodias seized her opportunity for revenge, instructing her daughter to demand the head of John the Baptist.

While Herod was troubled by this request — we hear that he actually considered John to be a "righteous and holy man" — he had made his daughter a very public promise. And so, "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her." Herodias had played her diabolical hand brilliantly, knowing Herod was more concerned with saving face than doing the right thing. And the king's insecurity sealed John's fate.

But this is about more than just a weak man being pushed into a corner and carrying out an unspeakable act. The message sent out to anyone with ears to hear is loud and clear: speak truth to power and get slaughtered. Dare to mess with those in authority, and end up in a shallow grave.

If this all sounds familiar, there's certainly some foreshadowing going on here that points to Jesus' own death. An innocent man killed at the hands of the powerful and ruthless authorities. And think about the parallels between Herod and Pontius Pilate. Both are men in positions to undo the course of injustice. And yet in the moment of decision, both demonstrate weakness, enslaved and swayed by public opinion. Concerned more for their own standing and reputation than for doing what is right. And so, the gruesome events they had the power to stop continued to unfold to their deadly conclusions.

In the end, the platter and the cross are both very public warnings to those who seek to topple or even just critique those in charge. Offer a vision of divinely sanctioned morality that doesn't fit in with the narrative of the powers that be, and you'll end up with your head on a platter or getting strung up on a cross. Those are pretty strong deterrents to anyone considering a public display of moral courage.

It is into this context that Jesus holds up and models an alternative way of life. A way of love that subverts power and privilege with love and compassion. And the powerful are threatened. They seek to silence him and his followers by nailing him to a cross and hoisting it up for all the world to see. It doesn't work, of course. Death becomes resurrection and, as one of my favorite prayers puts it, "let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Try as you might, you simply cannot silence salvation.

But what do these stories say to those of us who seek to do right in the face of oppression? I don't know about you, but I don't want my head on a platter. Nor do I want to be nailed to a cross.

But that doesn't mean we should stay silent in the face of injustice, just because it's safer or more comfortable. Despite the slings and arrows that may come our way, if we are to remain faithful to our beliefs, to the way of Jesus, we must speak out for what is right and moral and just and holy. Despite the potentially painful consequences of rubbing the privileged and powerful the wrong way. Even when, especially when, we *are* the privileged and powerful.

The question for us is what are we, as Christians, willing to risk for our faith? On what issues are we willing to speak out even at the risk of offending friends and family and neighbors? It surely would have been easier for John the Baptist to just keep his mouth shut. To stay in his lane. To live to fight another day. But he risked everything — his freedom, his life — to uphold his vision for a better world. One which pointed not to himself but to God.

What are you willing to risk for your faith? That's the question every Christian must ultimately answer. Fortunately, the result is generally less violent than what John and Jesus endured. Maybe we lose a friend; maybe we get an angry e-mail; maybe we endure public humiliation. Which seems like a small price to pay when compared to the platter and the cross. But I invite you to reflect deeply on this question. You may not be willing to risk everything, but you must be willing to risk something.