

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Mark 6:1-29

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

Today's text has a harsh reality check for us. Rejection is one of the costs of discipleship. And nobody likes rejection, right? We want to be liked. We want to be respected. We want to be understood and seen and valued. We want to be loved. Rejection is something many of us seek to avoid and so in order not to feel that uncomfortable feeling we seek not to offend, not to be controversial, not to speak our convictions...we seek to “keep the peace”...but at what cost?

The fact is that as we look at Mark 6 we see that being a faithful follower of Jesus means we will encounter resistance. Discipleship gets real in this text. There seems to be rejection at every turn. And the stakes are high.

Jesus gets rejected by his family and friends; he's kicked out of his support network and community. The disciples know they could get rejected by the

people they're dependent upon for hospitality, for lodging and food; they could very well be kicked out on the streets. And John the Baptist gets killed by Herod; he's kicked out of this life altogether - the ultimate rejection.

Rejection of the prophet who paved the way for Jesus.
Rejection of Jesus himself.
Rejection of the disciples who follow Jesus.

Oh - I just remembered we forgot one announcement at the beginning of service, *Anyone wants to sign up follow Jesus, there'll be a table in the narthex on your way out. When you sign up you can list your preferred type of rejection - family & friends, housing & food, or life (that is, death) - but make sure you put your second choice, because not everyone will get their first choice.*

I'm making light of this but really - it's not funny, is it? It's real. And I don't know about you but Mark 6 challenges me.

So let's break it down. The three rejections in this text are really about resistance to mission and message.¹ Human resistance is real. And what's remarkable is that when many of us encounter resistance, we feel rejected and back down. But here we see that resistance doesn't lead to withdrawal, it leads to the continuation and even expansion of mission and ministry.

So let's start with Jesus himself. He comes to his hometown of Nazareth and begins to teach in the synagogue. Many are astounded but then they start to question him. It's like they like what they're hearing, but then when they see who's speaking, they flip out. *Jesus! No way man. Who do you think you are dude? You're just like us. A carpenter. Where do you get off talking to us like you know more than us? Or like you have some sort of special powers?*

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "Podcast #395 - Death of John the Baptist," *I Love to Tell the Story* (1 Feb. 2020),

Needless to say - they are offended. They welcome his message, but they resist the messenger. Jesus is rejected by those who have known him the longest. It's almost as if he is too familiar to them. They are not able to see Jesus for who he is today. His family and friends seems to see him only for who he was when he was growing up among them and they're not able to see the Messiah in him...the anointing, or the power that is in him now. And if Jesus is even one ounce human, then this rejection surely hurts. To not have approval of your family and friends is painful, even when we pretend it isn't.

Yet Jesus doesn't seem to be surprised by his rejection. He *is* surprised by their lack of belief. But he heals some people anyway. Almost as if to say, *"My power and message do not depend upon your belief alone. You can doubt me, but you cannot stop me."* The resistance Jesus feels in Nazareth is personal, and yet he responds to this rejection with a

accessed on Feb. 9, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1226.

renewal of purpose and conviction.

It's almost as if he uses this rejection to make him more determined and to propel him forward in his mission in a new way. Have you ever had that experience? Where someone doubts you or resists what you have to offer and that just makes you that much more determined or driven? I don't know if that's what is happening here, but it might be because Jesus then takes those who are closest to him now, the twelve disciples, those who are essentially his family now...and he sends them out two by two to spread the message of God's kin-dom. He gives the disciples authority over unclean spirits, that is, he gives them the power to heal. And almost as if he's speaking directly against the very lack of hospitality he received in his hometown, he tells them to go out and rely on the hospitality of strangers. They are to eat in their homes, listen to their stories, look at their artwork, listen to their music, sleep under their roofs.

The very first time Jesus tells his disciples how to spread his

message, it's not about trying to get them to go get people and bring them into one place or to bring them back to him as the preacher and pastor so he can evangelize. No, he tells them - just go out into their homes and spend time with them on their turf. The point is not growing the synagogue attendance or growing church attendance. The point is spreading the good news of God's kin-dom to as many people as possible...in a way that doesn't require folks to seek us out but rather that meets them where they are.

Jesus tells them to take virtually nothing but their partner and their message and he tells them to expect rejection and essentially says - *"it's okay if they don't want you"* - just leave if that happens. And then he sends them out. And the remarkable thing is - all things considered - they are successful! (Maybe because they are prepared for some rejection so it doesn't derail them from their mission when it happens.)

This is definitely a first for the expansion of Jesus' ministry...the disciples healing and helping folks on their own -

with the power of Jesus but not without the man Jesus by their side. It shows us what can happen when we take a risk for our faith - many times, lots of times, that risk pays off!

But then, just as we are starting to feel good about evangelizing and our role as Jesus' disciples...that maybe spreading the love of God's kin-dom won't be so difficult for us after all, Mark interrupts our wishful thinking and tells us a story. All along, we've been in real time with Mark as he narrates to us the adventures of Jesus and his disciples, but now, since the disciples are sent out two by two, while they are gone and while we the listeners are waiting for them to return, Mark tells us the story of what actually happened to John the Baptist.

And it seems like a good time since people are starting to think that John the Baptist has come back from the dead because this Jesus guy is acting a whole lot like him.

Remember, we haven't heard about John the Baptist since Mark chapter 1, verse 14 when

we found out he was arrested. Things have been radio silent since then. Well, now we're going to find out just exactly what happened.

There are three main characters in this story, and each one has an important role to play. There's the good character: John the Baptist. The bad character: Herodias. And the character that's caught in the middle: Herod.²

And it's kind of interesting to watch how this plays out. The good character, John the Baptist, is the strong moral voice in the story. Herod and his brother's wife Herodias have an affair and get married and John has spoken out against it and now he's paying the price for it. He said to Herod - "*you can't have your brother's wife - it's against the law*" but Herod had taken Herodias as his wife anyway.

This is significant. In this case, John is not arrested because of his baptizing message of repentance or because he was a crazy guy in the wilderness who ate locusts as he preached

² Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

a message about God's kingdom. We *now* know that John was arrested because he held someone accountable to the law - and that someone was a man in authority and in power, Herod. John saw this moral and ethical responsibility as part of his message and ministry.

And so John becomes this hero like figure - in which he's willing to speak the truth to power, and, as we see, he pays the price for doing that. It's almost as if from the context of Mark 6 we are hearing the gospel writer ask us today, *What does it mean to actually be committed to speaking the truth even among the powers that would seek to suppress it?*³

Anyone who says the Bible is not relevant - isn't reading it! We humans may be centuries apart but our hearts struggle with the same things, don't they?

Here we see a powerful witness: John prioritizes the law and truth above his own reputation and life. Fear does not keep him from faltering from what he knows is right.

It's quite remarkable. And selfless.

Then we have Herodias, who plays the character opposite of John. She's the figure who is most straightforwardly not just gonna get even with John, she wants to silence him. John is a truth-teller and holds people accountable to the law, even authorities that feel they are above it. And quite frankly, Herodias does not like being told that what she's doing is out of bounds, that it's illegal, or improper, and so she starts trying to figure out how to get her way, and in the end...how to put John the Baptist out of business permanently.⁴ But she feels stuck because she knows her newfound husband won't kill John.

And this husband? His name is Herod. And Herod is the one who is caught in the middle. Herod arrests John because John won't be quiet about him taking his brother's wife, but to be honest, Herod doesn't quite know what to do with John once he's arrested. He likes to listen to John preach the text says. And so this perplexes

³ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁴ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

Herod. He has a curiosity about John the Baptist, a kind of odd respect and liking of him, and yet, John is making his life difficult. And so what is Herod to do?

Well, Herod likes to be able to do things his way. He likes to be able to live his life the way he wants. That is, he likes to be able to have an affair if he wants to do it and he doesn't care about being out of the bounds of the law *but he also* likes to have a little religious stuff on the side, a little inspiration too; he like to listen to John. He wants to have it both ways - some morality and spirituality to inspire him, as long as he can still do whatever he wants, right? As long as not *every* rule applies to him.

And actually for a while, Herod has worked it out so that he can have his cake and eat it too. He has his relationship with Herodias *and* he has his captive prophet in a cage who he can listen to preach and teach whenever he wanted.⁵

But the rubber hits the road for Herod when he no longer can

have it both ways. Herod throws a big birthday party for himself and tells Herodias' daughter, "*I love your dancing*" and as if to show off in front of all the people in power around him at his party, Herod then said, "*What do you want? I'll give you whatever you want...just name it and it's yours.*"

Well, she runs off and confers with her mother, Herodias, who seizes this opportunity and says to tell him that she wants the head of John the Baptist. And Herodias' daughter even makes the request more dramatic by requesting his head on a platter. *Ha Herod! You can't have it both ways anymore...now what will you do?*⁶

Herod is caught, and he has to make his choice. And he's got a lot of ego involved in this. He has made that promise to Herodias' daughter that he'd give her whatever she wanted in front of a room full of people powerful people - and, like any of us would probably feel, Herod feels like he can't go back on his word. It would be embarrassing. It would make

⁵ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁶ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

him appear weak. Not in control. He said he would deliver and so he's going to deliver - even if it means killing off the prophet that he admits that he likes to listen to.⁷

Herod chooses Herodias over John. John is killed. For no good reason. A good man is executed, beheaded, because a man in power decides to kill him just because he can. John did not break the law. Herod did. The good guy gets it in the end and it seems like one more tragic story in world history in which the powerful do in the righteous and bad triumphs over good.

And it may be just that.

I think we do have to face the reality that sometimes our resistance - sometimes our speaking truth and standing up for what is right - will get us killed, will get us fired, will get us ridiculed, will get us ousted, will get us rejected. We have to be prepared as followers of Jesus to know that when we speak up and speak out and stand up for what is right - we very well may be

persecuted...and even silenced. At the very least, we may be unpopular.

But what the story of John the Baptist shows us is that there's a larger end game here. And this is what the gospel writer Mark wants us to think about too. He tells us John's story not just to fill time while the disciples are out evangelizing two by two (having some success)...he tells this story to us for two reasons I think: 1) to remind us that sometimes rejection will mean shaking off the dust from our feet and moving on and sometimes rejection will mean consequences much more severe - even perhaps suffering and death. And 2) to foreshadow for us the trajectory of Jesus' own rejection - not just from his hometown, but his own rejection by all the people in power and the authorities who will ultimately have him executed as well.

Because John's death is not a one-off event. It will be repeated - with Jesus. Herod shows up again in this gospel story. He shows up at Jesus'

⁷ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

death too. Jesus will be killed - not for breaking the law - but he will be crucified for spreading a message of God's love and kin-dom. He will be killed by people in power because his message and his following threaten their power and the way they look to do things. However - when he dies - it's not just that the good guy dies and the bad guy wins. Not this time. God does something much bigger with Jesus' story.

As one scholar said, *"On the third day we will see God say NO to this pattern of the lawless 'doing in' the innocent. The resurrection will be God's 'NO' to our human proclivities to prioritize power over love, self-preservation over human dignity for all. The resurrection will be God's unequivocal statement that life is what God wants, not death. That righteousness is what God desires - not corruption. That new [and restored] relationship - not an end to relationship - is what God longs for."*⁸

What we're shown in this story is that the Mission of sharing God's love and grace with the

world is what Jesus is finally and forever about. In the story of John, we see what the actual shape of resistance looks like in his case, and we can see a glimpse into what will be the culmination of the story of Jesus in Jesus' own death and God's NO to that pattern of powerplays - and God's YES to the promise of resurrection.⁹ ...of new life...which really is a new way of being in the world. But we can't get there without resisting the old way, the current way.

The whole story of John the Baptist makes me wonder...what would I have done? I mean, sure it was against the law for Herod to take his brother's wife...it's not right or fair. But would I have said something about it? Especially if I knew I could be arrested? Probably not. And I would have justified it by saying, *"Really...this is a matter between Herod and his brother and Herodias...this is not my place...and besides, if I'm arrested or killed - I can't keep spreading the good news of Jesus? I'll be able to help way more people by just*

⁸ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

*turning my head the other way
on this one."*

We can always justify our way out of any decision. We see it happening *all around us* every day. The question for us is - is it happening *within us* too? Are we justifying our lack of boldness and courage in our faith because of a fear of offending someone or a fear of rejection or a fear of suffering or a fear of revolt? A fear of our family disagreeing or our friends frowning? Jesus shows us that those fears, while very real, are not a reason not to stand for truth and for justice. Our own families and friends might reject us. Strangers might reject us. Authorities might reject us - or arrest us. And yet Jesus doesn't say these are bad things. I'm sure he doesn't like them. But he never says stop speaking up or standing up because of these potential rejections or consequences. His very life is a living and dying and rising testimony to them.

And so the question I want to leave us all with today is this: *What is one conviction that you believe so much in that you'll put everything on the line for*

it? One truth that you'll risk resistance and rejection for?

That conviction is not going to be the same for all of us. It doesn't need to be. But we need to have at least one - if not more - things that we are willing to speak out for and stand up for - no matter the cost.

As we see with the disciples, it's easier to stand up and speak out when we do so together. In pairs. In groups. In a community. Our voices are stronger when we unite them together. Find some others who share your conviction. And go out two by two. Speak out. Stand up. Do not be silent.

We need courage. It will not be easy. We will be rejected. We will be resisted. We will suffer. But what is the alternative? To live with a faith that doesn't actually impact our lives or change how we believe or behave in the world?

Is that really faith at all?

Trust me, I get it. This is not an easy message. Whenever I preach, I'm preaching first and foremost to myself. I don't

want to suffer for my faith. But here's the deal. I am already suffering. And so are you. People all over the world are suffering. Including you and me. And our faith - our ethics and convictions - they are the most powerful tool we have against the powers that keep suffering in places.

The cost of discipleship - the cost of following Jesus - of standing up for what is right - of standing beside those whose voices are not being heard - of standing with those who are hungry, hurt, and dying - this cost...it's high. But we have the capacity to suffer and sacrifice. Think of parents who will do anything for their children? Parents will put their life on in the line if it means their child will live. Or think of women and men who enlist in the military knowing they are prepared to make sacrifices - even potentially to lose their life -for our country. They make these decisions; take these risks. Why don't we, as people of faith? What are we risking for the sake of all God's children in the world?

Writer Burke Wilkinson said,
"Rejection is the sand in the

oyster, the irritation that ultimately produces the pearl."

Here's the thing - when we are irritated...irritated for justice and truth and love and dignity for all...maybe the pearl will come in our lifetime, maybe it won't, but that's not our motivating factor.

Our motivating factor is grace. The fact that Jesus already has come and comes again every day into our lives and empowers and encourages and emboldens us in his name to live out of love and justice and truth.

Because we have been given much, we too must give.

Yes, it will cost us something. But it won't cost us nearly as much as not doing anything at all.

Amen.