

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson we are presented with a very realistic and very revealing lesson about human nature that I'm fairly certain will NOT be posted in our public-school classrooms because it points directly at us and not them. We are shown in this Gospel lesson that at the center of our worldview is our selfishness and our self-centeredness. Moreover, this is not one of those Gospel passage that can be preached with the assurance of prosperity if we remain true to the faith because it obviously does not work out for John that way. This Gospel lesson today is a real life come-to-Jesus passage that calls us out for who we truly are.

As I think about this passage and cower in my humanness and my fear about how much this passage speaks to me and to us all about our human nature, I find that in my embarrassment there is comfort when I recall that the Lord makes known that we do not choose the Father, the Father chooses us. (John 15:16) St. Paul today is also reminding the church community in Ephesus that God, chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And this Gospel lesson this morning shows us why God has chosen us, because when it comes to choosing, we will simply choose ourselves with no regard to the fullness of our choices...especially when it comes to saving face before others.

Today's Gospel lesson does not directly mention that the "banquet" or the "birthday party" got out of hand, but Roman "banquets" routinely did, especially when they closed with dancing. If indeed a Herodian princess danced at such an event, it is bitter evidence of how corrupt the Herodians had become, not to mention how corrupt the party itself became.¹ And with the debauchery, the drunkenness, and even the malicious scheming of this party we see that they are not the only bad choices that are made. Nonetheless, amidst all of this, the Good News is present and is triumphant despite the selfishness and self-centeredness of our humanness.

Saint Augustine, (354-430[22]) was a theologian, philosopher, and the bishop whose writings influenced the development of Western philosophy and Western Christianity. He is without a doubt one of the most important Church Fathers. Augustine said that our human predicament is not that we are ignorant but that we stand in the presence of alternatives. And whichever alternative we choose, we do so with the hope of finding happiness. Furthermore, Augustine points out that we ourselves cannot be *the good by which we are made happy* and that *we do not find rest or happiness until we are at rest in God.*²

We stand in the presence of so many alternatives...choices, which do we choose...what shall we choose? There is so much in the world around us today to choose from...so many alternatives if we dislike or disagree, if we are board or feel threatened in any way...there are alternatives. We are bombarded with and saturated in alternatives or choices of any thinkable kind that perhaps were not available to us years ago...which do we choose? We choose as Augustine suggests, we choose that which we think or assume will make "ME" happy. Or, in the case of Herod, he chooses to have John beheaded in order to save his own...I'll say face.

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Herod's thinking and acting is a perfect example of an ethical syllogism proposed by Aristotle that reads:

For where it is in our power to act, it is also in our power NOT to act, and where we can say "no," we can also say "yes." Therefore, if we have the power to act where it is noble to act, we also have the power not to act where not to act is base (dishonorable)...conversely, if we have the power not to act where inaction is noble, we also have the power to act where action is (dishonorable).

Aristotle goes on to say in Book III of, *Nichomachean Ethics*:

...we must conclude that it depends on us whether we are decent or worthless individuals.⁴

I think what bothers me most about Herod's choice at this party in our Gospel lesson, is that, Herod actually liked listening to John. The Gospel says that:

²⁰ ...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. (Mark 6:20)

Herod had the power to act in a noble fashion, but in *his eyes*...this oath he has sworn before the assembled guests, and his need to maintain his honor, was a feasible and perhaps even a practical excuse, even at the cost of human life, regardless of who it is. If you think about this...likewise, when confronted with the task of dealing with Jesus, Pilate is influenced by his need to "wash his hands" of the choice that confronts him with the life or death of Jesus. Pilate foolishly assumes that if he gives the crowd the choice, he is then freed of the responsibility of that choice. Again, like Herod, Pilate could have chosen to act in a noble fashion but he chose to kick the can of choice to the people.

And of course, the crowd is then confronted with a choice. They too could have chosen a noble outcome, but they chose to free a murderous insurrectionist by the name of Barabbas and to have Jesus crucified. From the choice of the crowd, we see the populist outcome is chosen...but is it the noble choice...in that moment...no, its not. But God once again, ends up making noble that which we have chosen to do.

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I say once again because in the Creation Story we choose our own way over God's command. In our choice, knowing we messed up...we then hide ourselves from God. As a result of our bad choice, it is God who chooses to come looking for us, and finds us, and we see once again that we do not choose God, God chooses us.

Fortunately, we have over two thousand years to see the ramification of these choices. And we can all sit here today and judge the choices that are before us in this Gospel lesson, as well as, the choices made throughout Holy Scripture...and we can judge then all as good or bad. But what would *our* choices be if we were in these same situations. Something tells me the outcome would NOT be much different as we can see over the course of historical events and within our current events...our choices are not always the correct choices...but God continues to choose us. So, if we open our hearts and our understanding...perhaps we can see that these men or even these people in their choices are not "worthless individuals" as Aristotle would classify them. Perhaps today's public is used to quickly classifying anyone who does not act favorably as "worthless individuals," but these folks mentioned throughout scripture are not worthless individuals, they are just simply decent people who have acted in a "not-so-noble" fashion.

While we may not have others literally beheaded or killed, we too are by nature at times willing to "sacrifice" others to maintain our honor, our reputation, perhaps even our prestige...in other words, we are quick to throw others "under-the-bus" to save face, and in some cases we will even back the bus over them to make ourselves appear noble, or righteous, or even pious. Furthermore, when it comes to faith, we choose to see the sin in others and in some cases even call it out, while we excuse our own sin and step on others to elevate ourselves. As I said, no one loses a head in our judgment and in our humanness, but I believe we are personifying this passage by claiming we don't do this sort of thing.

So here we sit today in the shadow of this dreadful story that reveals the human selfishness and self-centeredness of us all and perhaps wondering about the Good News. So, what are we to say about this passage? In the confusion and possibly even fear of the revelation of our bad choices there is Good News when Herod reminds all that the one whom he beheaded, John, has been raised! In this horrible phrase of death, we hear life! John has been raised! In this we hear the promise of Good News that we too live in the hope of a resurrection. Despite all the bad choices, all the debauchery, the drunkenness, and even the malicious scheming we are reminded of the resurrection amidst all of this...a resurrection that is not only for John, but there is the promise made to us all through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The very words of this man named Herod, this man who has made some horrible choices in his life, points us all to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when he says, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

In this very brief passage, I am reminded to look NOT at the man and his choices, but look at his words and what they are directing us to. In these words, from Herod, I choose to hear St. Paul instead of everything else in this passage. St Paul writes to the Church in Rome these very familiar words used at so many funerals:

^{6:1} What then are we to say?

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk

in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:1, 3-5)

The Word of hope and promise is ever before us and is unfading despite our ill choices. The Word of Jesus Christ is hope in the promise of salvation...it is the very same Word of hope and promise placed into our hands in this Holy Meal...it is the Word of hope and life that we eat in this Holy Meal. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with the Word that is Jesus Christ.

Today we hear that John has been raised...in this we are reminded that we have hope, we have the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of God's grace in the promise that we too are raised...with John and with all that God chooses...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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As I think about this passage and cower in my humanness and my fear about how much this passage speaks to me and to us all about our human nature, I find that in my embarrassment there is comfort when I recall that the Lord makes known that we do not choose the Father, the Father chooses us. (John 15:16) St. Paul today is also reminding the church community in Ephesus that God, chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And this Gospel lesson this morning shows us why God has chosen us, because when it comes to choosing, we will simply choose ourselves with no regard to the fullness of our choices...especially when it comes to saving face before others.

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And of course, the crowd is then confronted with a choice. They too could have chosen a noble outcome, but they chose to free a murderous insurrectionist by the name of Barabbas and to have Jesus crucified. From the choice of the crowd, we see the populist outcome is chosen...but is it the noble choice...in that moment...no, its not. But God once again, ends up making noble that which we have chosen to do.

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As I think about this passage and cower in my humanness and my fear about how much this passage speaks to me and to us all about our human nature, I find that in my embarrassment there is comfort when I recall that the Lord makes known that we do not choose the Father, the Father chooses us. (John 15:16) St. Paul today is also reminding the church community in Ephesus that God, chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And this Gospel lesson this morning shows us why God has chosen us, because when it comes to choosing, we will simply choose ourselves with no regard to the fullness of our choices...especially when it comes to saving face before others.

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And of course, the crowd is then confronted with a choice. They too could have chosen a noble outcome, but they chose to free a murderous insurrectionist by the name of Barabbas and to have Jesus crucified. From the choice of the crowd, we see the populist outcome is chosen...but is it the noble choice...in that moment...no, its not. But God once again, ends up making noble that which we have chosen to do.

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson we are presented with a very realistic and very revealing lesson about human nature that I'm fairly certain will NOT be posted in our public-school classrooms because it points directly at us and not them. We are shown in this Gospel lesson that at the center of our worldview is our selfishness and our self-centeredness. Moreover, this is not one of those Gospel passage that can be preached with the assurance of prosperity if we remain true to the faith because it obviously does not work out for John that way. This Gospel lesson today is a real life come-to-Jesus passage that calls us out for who we truly are.

As I think about this passage and cower in my humanness and my fear about how much this passage speaks to me and to us all about our human nature, I find that in my embarrassment there is comfort when I recall that the Lord makes known that we do not choose the Father, the Father chooses us. (John 15:16) St. Paul today is also reminding the church community in Ephesus that God, chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And this Gospel lesson this morning shows us why God has chosen us, because when it comes to choosing, we will simply choose ourselves with no regard to the fullness of our choices...especially when it comes to saving face before others.

Today's Gospel lesson does not directly mention that the "banquet" or the "birthday party" got out of hand, but Roman "banquets" routinely did, especially when they closed with dancing. If indeed a Herodian princess danced at such an event, it is bitter evidence of how corrupt the Herodians had become, not to mention how corrupt the party itself became.¹ And with the debauchery, the drunkenness, and even the malicious scheming of this party we see that they are not the only bad choices that are made. Nonetheless, amidst all of this, the Good News is present and is triumphant despite the selfishness and self-centeredness of our humanness.

Saint Augustine, (354-430[22]) was a theologian, philosopher, and the bishop whose writings influenced the development of Western philosophy and Western Christianity. He is without a doubt one of the most important Church Fathers. Augustine said that our human predicament is not that we are ignorant but that we stand in the presence of alternatives. And whichever alternative we choose, we do so with the hope of finding happiness. Furthermore, Augustine points out that we ourselves cannot be *the good by which we are made happy* and that *we do not find rest or happiness until we are at rest in God.*²

We stand in the presence of so many alternatives...choices, which do we choose...what shall we choose? There is so much in the world around us today to choose from...so many alternatives if we dislike or disagree, if we are board or feel threatened in any way...there are alternatives. We are bombarded with and saturated in alternatives or choices of any thinkable kind that perhaps were not available to us years ago...which do we choose? We choose as Augustine suggests, we choose that which we think or assume will make "ME" happy. Or, in the case of Herod, he chooses to have John beheaded in order to save his own...I'll say face.

¹ Bowman Thurston, Bonnie, *Preaching Mark*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002. Chapter 5, "The Ministry Around Capernaum, 6:14-29, page 76.

² Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Elements of Philosophy, an Introduction, 3rd Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993 Chapter 3, "Modes of Love" Augustine, page 51.

Today in the Gospel lesson it might seem obvious that Herodias has made the bad choice for her daughter by seeking the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And as hateful and as vilely gruesome as Herodias' choice to destroy John the Baptist plays out in this passage from the Gospel, her choice is NOT the choice that I want to present to us today to think about. The choice that mostly represents our selfishness and our self-centeredness is Herod's choice. Herod thinks more of the drunken oaths he has sworn and his selfish honor before the assembled guests than he does of the prophet whom he was allegedly protecting.³

Herod's thinking and acting is a perfect example of an ethical syllogism proposed by Aristotle that reads:

For where it is in our power to act, it is also in our power NOT to act, and where we can say "no," we can also say "yes." Therefore, if we have the power to act where it is noble to act, we also have the power not to act where not to act is base (dishonorable)...conversely, if we have the power not to act where inaction is noble, we also have the power to act where action is (dishonorable).

Aristotle goes on to say in Book III of, *Nichomachean Ethics*:

...we must conclude that it depends on us whether we are decent or worthless individuals.⁴

I think what bothers me most about Herod's choice at this party in our Gospel lesson, is that, Herod actually liked listening to John. The Gospel says that:

²⁰ ...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. (Mark 6:20)

Herod had the power to act in a noble fashion, but in *his eyes*...this oath he has sworn before the assembled guests, and his need to maintain his honor, was a feasible and perhaps even a practical excuse, even at the cost of human life, regardless of who it is. If you think about this...likewise, when confronted with the task of dealing with Jesus, Pilate is influenced by his need to "wash his hands" of the choice that confronts him with the life or death of Jesus. Pilate foolishly assumes that if he gives the crowd the choice, he is then freed of the responsibility of that choice. Again, like Herod, Pilate could have chosen to act in a noble fashion but he chose to kick the can of choice to the people.

And of course, the crowd is then confronted with a choice. They too could have chosen a noble outcome, but they chose to free a murderous insurrectionist by the name of Barabbas and to have Jesus crucified. From the choice of the crowd, we see the populist outcome is chosen...but is it the noble choice...in that moment...no, its not. But God once again, ends up making noble that which we have chosen to do.

³ Keck, Leander, senior editor. *NIB, The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume VIII General Articles on the New Testament, The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark.* Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995. Commentary Reflections on Mark 6:14-29, page 599.

⁴ *Philosophic Classics, 2nd Edition, Volume I.* Forrest E. Baird, Editor, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* Book III Chapter 5 par 10, page 406.

I say once again because in the Creation Story we choose our own way over God's command. In our choice, knowing we messed up...we then hide ourselves from God. As a result of our bad choice, it is God who chooses to come looking for us, and finds us, and we see once again that we do not choose God, God chooses us.

Fortunately, we have over two thousand years to see the ramification of these choices. And we can all sit here today and judge the choices that are before us in this Gospel lesson, as well as, the choices made throughout Holy Scripture...and we can judge then all as good or bad. But what would *our* choices be if we were in these same situations. Something tells me the outcome would NOT be much different as we can see over the course of historical events and within our current events...our choices are not always the correct choices...but God continues to choose us. So, if we open our hearts and our understanding...perhaps we can see that these men or even these people in their choices are not "worthless individuals" as Aristotle would classify them. Perhaps today's public is used to quickly classifying anyone who does not act favorably as "worthless individuals," but these folks mentioned throughout scripture are not worthless individuals, they are just simply decent people who have acted in a "not-so-noble" fashion.

While we may not have others literally beheaded or killed, we too are by nature at times willing to "sacrifice" others to maintain our honor, our reputation, perhaps even our prestige...in other words, we are quick to throw others "under-the-bus" to save face, and in some cases we will even back the bus over them to make ourselves appear noble, or righteous, or even pious. Furthermore, when it comes to faith, we choose to see the sin in others and in some cases even call it out, while we excuse our own sin and step on others to elevate ourselves. As I said, no one loses a head in our judgment and in our humanness, but I believe we are personifying this passage by claiming we don't do this sort of thing.

So here we sit today in the shadow of this dreadful story that reveals the human selfishness and self-centeredness of us all and perhaps wondering about the Good News. So, what are we to say about this passage? In the confusion and possibly even fear of the revelation of our bad choices there is Good News when Herod reminds all that the one whom he beheaded, John, has been raised! In this horrible phrase of death, we hear life! John has been raised! In this we hear the promise of Good News that we too live in the hope of a resurrection. Despite all the bad choices, all the debauchery, the drunkenness, and even the malicious scheming we are reminded of the resurrection amidst all of this...a resurrection that is not only for John, but there is the promise made to us all through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The very words of this man named Herod, this man who has made some horrible choices in his life, points us all to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when he says, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

In this very brief passage, I am reminded to look NOT at the man and his choices, but look at his words and what they are directing us to. In these words, from Herod, I choose to hear St. Paul instead of everything else in this passage. St Paul writes to the Church in Rome these very familiar words used at so many funerals:

^{6:1} What then are we to say?

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk

in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:1, 3-5)

The Word of hope and promise is ever before us and is unfading despite our ill choices. The Word of Jesus Christ is hope in the promise of salvation...it is the very same Word of hope and promise placed into our hands in this Holy Meal...it is the Word of hope and life that we eat in this Holy Meal. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with the Word that is Jesus Christ.

Today we hear that John has been raised...in this we are reminded that we have hope, we have the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of God's grace in the promise that we too are raised...with John and with all that God chooses...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.