



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 15, 2018
AMOS 7:7-15; PSALM 85:8-13; EPHESIANS 1:3-14; MARK 6:14-29

THE SHOCKING TRUTH OF AUTHORITY

In 1961 social psychologist Stanley Milgram began a series of experiments in a basement at Yale University.¹ At their core, Milgram was looking at issues of authority, particularly if people would go so far as to kill another merely because they were told to by a perceived authority figure, regardless of moral objection.

In his experiment a subject was led to believe that they were assisting in a learning experiment by delivering electric shocks to a “learner” named Mr. Wallace. In actuality, Mr. Wallace was in on the experiment and an actor. Mr. Wallace was hooked up to electrodes and the subject was even given an example shock to show it was real. In reality though, no shocks were delivered to Mr.

Wallace, but the key is that the subjects didn't know that.

Each “incorrect answer” garnered Mr. Wallace a shock, increasing in voltage each time. Before them, the subject had a scale indicating 15 volts as a slight shock, 300 volts as a dangerous and severe shock, and 450 volts as deadly.

Mr. Wallace gave mostly wrong answers on purpose, causing the voltage to increase by 15 volts for each wrong answer. As the experiment progressed and the voltage increased, Mr. Wallace would scream, beg to be let out of the experiment, declare that he had heart-problems, frantically bargain, and eventually go silent, limp, and seemingly dead—all an act. If the subject had an

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<https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

objection or concern, they were prodded onward by Milgram with up to four escalating orders:

The first was, “please continue.”

The second was, “the experiment requires you to continue.”

The third was “it is absolutely essential that you continue.”

The fourth was “you have no other choice but to continue.”

So, what did he find? Would a person administer a lethal shock to an innocent person because they were told to?

We hear in today’s gospel reading that Herod faces his own moral conflict. John the Baptist has been telling him that his marriage to his brother’s wife Herodias is unlawful. We don’t really know what Herod thinks about this condemnation from the text, but we know for certain that Herodias is upset. We are told that she “had a grudge against [John], and wanted to kill him.”² But, Herod won’t allow it. He respects John, he fears John, he knows that John is an upright and holy man, and we are told that Herod, while confused about what John says, liked to listen to him. And, it all goes downhill from here.

To be clear, this is a dysfunctional family. Scholars debate whether the dancing girl is the daughter of Herod and Herodias, or Herodias’ daughter from a previous marriage. Frequently the girl is even given a name, Salome but we don’t know for sure.

Scholars don’t agree about what kind of dance is being performed either. Is it an innocent child dancing before her father at a party, or an overtly sexualized dance that has Herod and his wealthy courtiers and officers drooling? Both are problematic—and using the child for parental gain. Whether fueled by drunkenness, lechery, or merely to show off to his friends, Herod goes so far as to grant Salome “up to half of his kingdom” as a result of her dance. Herodias tells her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist. But, Salome, likely pointing to her lack of innocence, ups her mother’s request. She tells Herod that not only does she want John the Baptist’s head. But, she would like it on a platter; a grotesque final course for this disturbing dinner party.

And, Herod is deeply grieved.

But, all eyes are on him now. He had sworn foolish oaths to Salome in front of his guests. And, he did not want to refuse her.

“Please continue.”

We would think Herod is the one with the authority—and that his conscience would guide him, after all he is the ruler.

“The experiment requires you to continue.”

He can call it off. He may look weaker or a bit foolish in front of the rich and powerful at his party, but he will have maintained his integrity—he will not have killed an innocent man.

“It is absolutely essential that you continue.”

² Mark 6:19

But, he relinquishes the authority to Salome, who relinquishes it to Herodias. A child, acting as a puppet for her mother, has entered Herod's psyche. She is his authority figure, with his selfish arrogance and conceit prodding him forward.

"You have no other choice but to continue."

So, "immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head."

Which brings us back to Milgram. What did he find? Could regular people go so far as to kill an innocent person?

Surprisingly, the answer is yes, for most people. Milgram and others who have recreated his experiment have found that about 65% of people would administer a lethal shock. With close to 100% administering a severe 300 volt shock.

What has been interesting about Milgram's experiment is that it is getting harder and harder to replicate. Once people hear of it, they become more skeptical of systems and people that demand outright allegiance.

The story of the beheading of John the Baptist falls at a curious point in the scriptures. It is right after the sending of the disciples that we heard last week and the coming back together of the disciples which we will hear next week.

Some have argued that in this place, this story is trying to teach the lesson that when we serve God, we may get into trouble like John the Baptist—that our devotion to God may cost us dearly, even with our lives. This is true and has been proven throughout the centuries.

But, I want you to think about another possibility. I think this story teaches followers of Jesus that it is both our right and duty to question authority and motives, especially when it doesn't make sense—even if it is from the church. The wide-eyed disciples going out on their mission are in a position of power, whether they know it or not. They could easily manipulate others for their own gain or misrepresent the truth in order to control. One only has to look at Christian history to see that the Bible has been used to enslave people, to discriminate, to subjugate and exploit women, to perpetuate child abuse, to be overly tribal, to commit acts of genocide and murder, and to neglect or harm the natural world. But we have a litmus test. God is love. Full stop. If it is not love, it is not of God.

I think Herod offers us a parable about the dangers of not adhering to what one knows to be right, even if it is unpopular, and even if it means giving actions a second thought or acknowledging when we've gone astray. John teaches us to "repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" and we hear in Amos that God dropped a plumb-line in the midst of the people. From here we can use our experience and reason to determine if we or our world are out of alignment with the love of God. No matter who we are, we must constantly check ourselves against this alignment.

Herod's party is a hellish feast marked with betrayal, violence, and self-interest. But I'm reminded of another feast. One much different, where Jesus shares his body and

blood freely with all people—the Eucharist we are about to celebrate. Jesus meets us here, week after week, and reorients us to the kind of people that God has called us to be. Society tells us that there is an authority that can lead us to kill, devalue, and oppress each other and the earth. But, friends, God is the authority that leads to life! In all that we do, we are to join God in God’s mission of love and unity. Paul tells us that God is gathering “up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”³ And we are called to participate in

this new reality, to bring the love of God to others, and to heal the world.

“Please continue” to walk in love.

“The experiment requires you to continue” to walk in love.

“It is absolutely essential that you continue” to walk in love.

“You have no other choice but to continue” to walk in love.

³ Ephesians 1:8-10

MARK 6:14-29 *[King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, 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.]



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