

Sermon for Sunday, July 15, 2018 - "The Most Important Measure"

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 15, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When we hear this awful story, it is so easy to see King Herod as a monster. It's so easy to demonize him and people like him, and there are plenty of people like him in our day. Certainly, his actions and actions like his need to be addressed. John the Baptist called Herod out. We as Christians are called to address injustice and violence. Yet to do that faithfully, we also need to examine our own lives in light of John's call to repent and follow in the ways of God's Kingdom. We have much more in common with King Herod than we'd care to admit.

We pick up Herod's story as he's starting to hear about the preaching and teaching and healing of Jesus. People are asking, "Who is this Jesus?" King Herod leaps to a strange conclusion based on his own guilt and fear. He decides that Jesus must be John the Baptist reincarnated - that John must have come back to haunt him after Herod beheaded him.

Dead or alive, John the Baptist has been troubling Herod for a while.

When Herod takes his brother's wife as his own, John does not hesitate in telling truth to power. John never hesitates in calling everyone, of every station, to repent.

Herod's new wife, Herodias, is furious and wants John dead. Herod does have John arrested. Yet something stops him from killing John - fear and confusion and the minute stirrings of the soul. We're told, "Herod feared John, knowing that John was a righteous and holy man, and Herod protected him. When he heard John he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him."

So, Herod keeps John in prison, locked away. He keeps John from interfering with his daily life, and yet, he likes to listen to him.

How often we do this same thing. We keep God's word, God's call to repentance, locked away where we can listen to it when we have time, when it won't cause us any trouble. We don't allow God's word to really impact our lives - to be the plumb line for our lives.

A plumb line, the symbol used by the prophet Amos in our reading today, is a simple builder's tool - a string with a weight at the end. Hold it to the top of the wall and it hangs straight down, showing you if your wall is built correctly. Amos says that God's word and God's ways are to be our plumb lines, to guide our lives.

Part of Herod's problem is that he has too many plumb lines working as he ponders what to do with John the Baptist. One plumb line is John's preaching - preaching that challenges and convicts him and could set

him free. Another is his wife's pressure to do her bidding. And then there's public opinion - John is a popular preacher. Killing him may not be the politically savvy move, yet Herod also needs to save face after John challenges his authority. Herod's also got to consider the will of his supporters and the will of his enemies.

No wonder Herod is perplexed - his plumb lines are getting tangled, calling him in different directions. Herod can't decide what to do, so he tries to get away with doing nothing. His hand is forced when the plumb lines come together and he can no longer delay. There's a party, he drinks too much, then he makes a rash promise. His wife seizes her moment and demands the death of John and there Herod sits, again perplexed and bothered. In the end, he chooses to silence the prophetic word. He picks the wrong plumb line by which to measure his life.

We know what it is to have a whole mess of plumb lines working on us - a whole bunch of different standards. Social media tells us to measure our lives by how many likes, followers and streaks we've got going. We judge our own and others' worth as people based on financial net worth. We feel pressed to do what's politically savvy even when it goes against our core values. We're told we have to put America first, family first, our own health first. We feel pressure to measure up at home, at work, in our families, with our weight and appearance.

This gets us all tangled up, unable to address bad behavior in our own lives and in the world, unable to live out God's ways of justice, mercy and love.

We need God to set us free from all this. We need God to reframe how we measure ourselves and others.

God does this through the Word. So, we can't keep God's word locked away in a prison of our own devising bringing it out to look at and listen to at our convenience; we can't seek to silence it. We need to really pay close attention to it as a builder looks to a plumb line.

God's Word shows us where we are tangled up, where we are crooked, where we have gone astray - it convicts us. Yet God's Word also sets us free from trying to measure up to so many competing, impossible standards. God's Word assures us that we are loved beyond measure and forgiven without fail. We are children of God, beloved of God as is every person on earth. This assurance frees us and also guides us to treat all people as God's beloved, for if we don't we are off track. God's Word of love, justice and mercy needs to be the measure of our lives.

It may sound naïve and narrow to think that God's word could really function as a good and true plumb line for us in our day with all the challenges we face.

But a new movement of Christians, entitled Reclaiming Jesus, is calling the church to live as followers of Jesus before anything, guided by the plumb line of God's word. This focus on putting Jesus' message, God's word, first is allowing them to call out injustice and oppression in the US the way John the Baptist did with King Herod. They have issued a statement which begins with the words:

We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

They then continue with six affirmations grounded in scripture that also lead them to reject things happening in our country today. I encourage you to check out the full statement at www.reclaimingjesus.org, but here are a few snippets:

WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership.

WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46).

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees who are being made into cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the "strangers" among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34).

God's Word is a good and true plumb line for us in these challenging times. It matters for you and for our world. God's Word comes to you today to say ... You are loved beyond measure and forgiven without fail. You are God's beloved. Go out to treat all people with God's love, to love and serve God's world guided by God's word of justice and mercy.

Let's take a few moments for silent prayer.

