

# "The Weakness of Death"

Mark 6:14-29

July 15, 2012

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Death seems to be so strong and so final. Because of its apparent strength and its sense of finality, death is often used as a weapon to stop things. In the old gangster movies, the way to stop a snitch was to rub him out. His death would stop him from talking. To stop criminal behavior, many advocate the use of capital punishment. While it is hoped that government executions of criminals will discourage other people from committing similar crimes, it is certain that the execution of guilty criminals will stop them from ever committing similar crimes again.

As much as we fear death for its finality, I would submit that death is not strong at all. In fact, death proves to be a very weak weapon as we see in our Gospel reading for today. Death can't stop anything.

Our entire Gospel reading is a flashback. Jesus' fame caused some people to think that John the Baptist, who had been killed by King Herod, had been raised from the dead. When you don't have 24 hour cable news, the internet, and social networking going on and only rumors and word of mouth, this seemed very plausible. Reports of Jesus' fame even go to Herod who thought that John had been raised. But how and for what reason had John been killed?

John had been proclaiming the Law in all of its sternness. He had called out King Herod and his wife, Herodias, for their illegal marriage. There were several factors here. Both Herod and Herodias had unscriptural divorces so they could be together. The divorce was illegal. Herodias had been married to Phillip, Herod's brother. To marry your brother's wife went against Levitical law. The marriage was illegal. If all this wasn't bad enough, Herodias was also a niece to Herod and Phillip. So, in addition to the marriage being illegal and unscriptural, it was also a little bit creepy.

This was getting to be a very embarrassing situation for the royal couple. In addition to condemning the sin, John was likely calling for repentance, too. This was something they didn't want to do. Herodias had a grudge and wanted to kill John. Herod, recognizing political reality, knew that

he couldn't kill John. In fact, he feared John because John was a prophet – a righteous and holy man. So, Herod had John thrown into jail and that was it.

Things changed at Herod's birthday party. He was entertaining the nobility, the military leaders, and the important people of Galilee. After eating and drinking to excess, Herod had Herodias's daughter – Herod's 14 year old great niece – come in and dance for the party. This pleased Herod so much that he vowed (perhaps under the influence of alcohol) to give the girl anything she wanted – up to half his kingdom. The girl asked her mother what she should ask for and Herodias saw her chance. She told her daughter, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." Herod was very sorry to hear this request. Nevertheless, because of his vows and his unwillingness to be embarrassed in front of important people, Herod ordered that John be beheaded and the head given to this little girl who, no doubt, turned it over to her mother.

But this untimely death of John didn't solve anything for Herod or Herodias. Although Herodias was able to kill the messenger, she was not able to kill the message. Death was far too weak to cover up their sin or stop its guilt. The message of repentance was still proclaimed by others, including Jesus. The guilt for this sin remained upon the both of them. They ultimately received the wages for their sin: death. Acts 12 tells us of Herod's grisly death: "On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." (Acts 12:21-23) John's condemnation of their sin reached out from beyond the grave to put Herod to death. Death could not stop this message.

John is a type or model of Jesus Christ. Jesus' ministry and what happened to him had been foreshadowed by the ministry of John the Baptist. Like John, Jesus' message got Him into trouble with the authorities (only these were the religious authorities, not the secular authorities). Like John, Jesus condemned sin and called for repentance.

But Jesus' message – the one that really got Him into trouble – was the message of God's grace. He said that God loved all people – both Jews and Gentiles. And God loved all Jews – both those who were strictly religious and those who were noted "sinners" – the prostitutes, the tax collectors and so on. While Jesus did not condone or overlook sin, He taught that God would forgive sin because He was gracious and merciful and not because the recipient was morally deserving or born into the right ethnic group.

Jesus demonstrated His teaching with His actions. He showed God's love by healing people, even on the Sabbath which was a violation of the "rules" developed by the religious people. Jesus hung around with notorious sinners and even ate with them. Jesus spoke vivid parables of God's complete and unconditional love – stories we know today as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

All of these words and deeds enraged the religious leaders and they held a grudge against Jesus like Herodias had against John. Like Herodias, the religious leaders thought they could get rid of their problem if they could get rid of Jesus. So, they arrested Jesus secretly at night with the help of one of Jesus' friends who betrayed Him. They convicted Jesus of a capital crime in an unfair and illegal trial. They got the Roman governor to carry out the death sentence through a little emotional and political blackmail. They got Jesus nailed to a cross and watched him die. The religious leaders were sure that the death of Jesus would solve their problems.

But death was far too weak to stop Jesus or His message. The message of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins was not stopped by Jesus' death. It was brought into existence through Jesus' death. This was God's plan all along. The sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross was the complete and perfect payment for all sins. Because God the Father punished His own perfect Son, He was now able to be gracious and forgive the sins of imperfect people.

Death was not only unable to stop the message. It was unable to stop the Messenger. Jesus defeated death by coming back to life three short days later to grant and guarantee life forever to all who have received forgiveness of sins by faith in Him. Death is just too weak.

And that brings us to our situation. Death still frightens us. We fear that it has great power to hurt us and hold on to us. We try to ignore death. We attempt to run away from death. We struggle to postpone death. We dread death. But we need not fear death, avoid death, or feel the need to run away from death. Death has lost its power. As in the case of John the Baptist and Jesus, death cannot stop us or hold us back. Death is just too weak.

Death cannot frighten us because it has lost all of its weapons to do so. Some fear death because of their guilt and apprehension over judgment following death. However, because Jesus Himself experienced death, our sin has been forgiven. The guilt is all gone. And God's judgment against us is "not guilty."

Some fear death because of the separation which it causes. Death as a punishment for sin was intended to do that: separate us from God and one another. However, because Jesus Himself was separated from His Father while hanging on the tree, we will never be separated from Him or from those who belong to Him. As Paul writes to the Romans, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

And some fear death because they think it will hold on to them and keep them in the grave. However, because Jesus rose victoriously from death and the grave, we will, too. As Jesus promised, "Because I live, you also will live." (John 14:19) Death could not hold Him. It will not be able to hold us.

In the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion are very afraid when they first come into the presence of the great and powerful Wizard of Oz. Later, when the dog Toto pulls back the curtain and reveals who and what the Wizard of Oz truly is – an elderly man who was a carnival huckster – they are no longer afraid for they see him for who he actually is and not who he appears to be.

Death is the same. It appears to be a great and powerful enemy which frightens us. Because of that fright, death has been used by Satan and others to keep us in submission and rob us of our

joy. By His death and His resurrection, Jesus has pulled back the curtain to reveal what death truly is now – a defeated enemy and spiritual huckster. We are no longer afraid when we see what death truly is now. Rather than worrying, fearing, or dreading death, we can scorn and deride death and its former power. Along with St. Paul, we can say, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:54-57) Amen