

July 11, 2021
The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 10), Year B
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Psalm 24
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

At first glance, today's readings might seem like texts of terror. The Gospel gives us a gruesome tale of an innocent man beheaded without a moment's notice, because a power-hungry royal family said so.

Meanwhile, the New Testament lesson from Ephesians is a favorite passage of those who believe in predestination – a lovely idea for those predestined to go to Heaven, but what about for those predestined to go to Hell? And whatever happened to the concept of free will?

On a closer reading, however, I don't think these are texts of terror. I think they are texts of hope and grace, texts meant to show us that even in our own moments of darkness and despair, Jesus Christ still brings light and good news, if we're willing to listen.

Ultimately, both readings remind us of the strength we can have when we put God at the center of our lives rather than ourselves. When we seek to follow God's will, we find hope and grace – but when we listen to our own desires, putting anything but God at the center, we develop disordered attachments, lose our way, and perhaps even harm ourselves or those around us.

We'll dive more into both lessons, but first, I'd like to share a silly story, though hopefully a relevant one, from my college years.

One semester, I had an early morning class, after which I would usually head to a café in the student center for a tasty breakfast sandwich. Once or twice a week, a friend would join me.

The man behind the breakfast sandwich counter was a big fellow named Jay, a popular guy on campus, probably in his 40s. When I say big, I mean he had big muscles, but also a big belly, a big smile, a big personality, and a big beard – a little like Hagrid from Harry Potter.

One day, my friend grabbed coffee for both of us while I grabbed breakfast sandwiches for both of us. Hagrid, I mean Jay, beamed and cheered me on. "Two sandwiches! That's my guy! Healthy appetite, healthy man!" The same thing happened again a few days later.

I don't know why, but I loved it. And eventually I took to buying two breakfast sandwiches for Jay's daily affirmation even when I was dining alone. This went on for weeks.

Eventually I realized how ridiculous I was being. But by then, I was afraid of disappointing Jay. So instead of ordering only one breakfast sandwich, I would avoid him and go to the omelet station instead. Not nearly as tasty.

I'm not sure what it was I was chasing: A misguided sense of masculinity that Jay affirmed, a friendly bonding moment, or just simple praise and approval. Regardless, I took something good

– a nice guy and a nice breakfast – and turned it into something unhealthy, developing a disordered attachment. And, that unhealthy emotional focus led to an unhealthy waistline.

I don't mean to compare breakfast sandwiches to a prophet's decapitation, but we do see something similar with Herod.

God was not at the center of Herod's life, nor any form of faith. Just as I focused on affirmation and masculinity, Herod's focus was on power.

This is Herod Antipas, the son of King Herod the Great from the Christmas story. This second Herod is not a king, though Mark does give him that title, whether erroneously or mockingly. But this Herod is just a tetrarch, a junior ruler under the emperor – though he yearns for his father's title of king.

Today's Herod is not a typical villain. Mark tells us the ruler actually recognizes John as a "righteous and holy" man. We are told that Herod even "liked to listen" to the prophet.

Everyone is capable of self-reflection. Were John's critiques of Herod and his corrupt ways beginning to break through? Was Herod starting to sense the truth about himself?

Perhaps, but all of that came to a screeching halt when Herod realized that listening to John would mean giving up power. That moment happens after Herod promises his daughter anything she asks for. The daughter, here called Herodias like her mother but called Salome by historians, follows her mother's advice and asks for John's head on a platter.

Herod doesn't want to do it. He likes John. But it would seem he has lost perspective on his daughter's wishes. What would usually be an appropriate family attachment has become disordered.

More importantly, Herod made his promise in front of a great multitude of guests. To go back on his word now would make him look weak, undermining his authority. So, Mark tells us, it is "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests" that Herod has John killed.

Herod's disordered attachment to power blinds him, it hurts John, and it ultimately hurts himself. I mentioned that he never had the title of king, but he did later ask it of the emperor – who instead sent him into exile in Spain.

Most of us never come close to wielding the power of royalty. And we're certainly almost never tempted to actually cut off someone's head – not really, anyway. But power is not the only force to which one can have a disordered attachment.

Herod's problem wasn't that he focused on power, but that he didn't focus on God. Anytime we put anything in the center of our gaze other than God in Christ, we can find ourselves adrift.

Power. Money. Ego. I was once told – as a joke, but also not a joke – that the word ego is an acronym for Edging God Out.

But good things can become disordered attachments, too. Spending so much time on a favorite hobby that we neglect work. Working so hard to succeed at our jobs or schools that we neglect family. Doting on family so much that we forget other important responsibilities. Getting so hung up on liturgical details that we start to worship the church rather than the Creator.

I talked about my breakfast sandwiches. But I could also have talked about past relationships and codependency. I'm sure many of us could.

Anything, even family or worship, can displace God and become an idol.

In fact, it might even be easier to let the everyday good things grow into disordered attachments than the more obvious and thus avoidable temptations like power. The positive nature of our passions and relationships can allow disorder to sneak up on us bit by bit, even disguising itself as right relationship at first. But the disorder is still there, and can slowly take over our lives.

Herod's story brings to mind a different New Testament reading, when Paul tells the Romans, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." When we develop disordered attachments, we do not do what we actually want. We feel ashamed, but all too often change nothing.

There is only one way, ultimately, to be sure that we keep all of our relationships right, and all of our justifiable attachments in order – one true way to rid ourselves of our shame – and that is to root our lives and hearts in God.

We are not strong enough to be disciplined or healthy alone. But when we set our sights on God, a loving God who can turn our wills to what is good and who blesses us and fills our world with grace and beauty, then everything becomes possible.

This is the point of today's reading from the epistle to the Christians at Ephesus, then part of Greece but now in Turkey. This passage reminds us that we are not capable of doing good in our lives, at least not alone – but Jesus is. God is the actor.

We are blessed, Ephesians tells us, because God has blessed us in Christ. We are blameless in love because God has chosen us. We are God's children because God destined us for that inheritance. We are blessed, chosen, destined, and loved because it is God who blesses, chooses, destines, and loves.

When we try to do these things ourselves, when we try to play God by becoming the deciders and living according to our own wills, we eventually fail. The feelings of shame return. But when we willfully give our wills to God, the grace that was always there becomes visible once more.

I mentioned earlier that Ephesians is a favorite text of those who preach predestination, given what it says about God choosing us for our inheritance in Christ.

Calvin and other theologians of predestination view predestination as a positive thing. They focus on the grace, the love, the glory that will be ours. Rejoice, for you are chosen!

That's all true, and yet it's also still troubling. If God chooses some for heaven, are others chosen for hell? What about free will?

Ultimately, the Bible never says that anyone is chosen for hell. It's an unanswered question: Does God choose some for salvation but leaves others' fates undecided? Does God choose that all *believers* will be saved, but give individuals free will to join that category? Or does God simply choose everyone for eternal life?

That third option, the positive universal vision, is what I'm inclined to see in this passage. We are told that God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

All things. God will gather *all* things and *all* people to God through Christ in the fullness of time. Such a beautiful image!

What we should ultimately take away from Ephesians is not that anyone is predestined for hell, but that it is God who determines destinies, not us, and it is God's will that saves, not ours.

Thus, we should seek to put God's will at the center of our lives rather than, like Herod, our own egos, ambitions, or passions.

When we need hope in dark times, and look inside ourselves to find it, we risk seeing our weaknesses, and feeling like shameful failures. But when we lift our eyes to God, we see light. When we lift our eyes to God, we find the knowledge that we were made in God's image, the knowledge that we are loved, and the knowledge that yes, we are chosen.

God chooses you. No matter who you are or what you've done, Jesus will always choose you, and Jesus will always love you. There's nothing you can do about it, so just accept that love and spread it. Amen.