

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – Proper 10 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Amos 7: 7-15, Psalm 85: 8-13, Ephesians 1: 3-14, Mark 6: 14-19

Today's gospel is the rather odd and gruesome story of the beheading of John the Baptist. It is one of those stories of scripture that has made its way into the secular culture. Many of the classic painters have used this passage as the inspiration for their work. It has been the theme for a play by Oscar Wilde, an opera by Richard Strauss and been incorporated into a film by Billy Wilder. Who has not heard the expression "she'll have my head on a platter" ...when contemplating doing something that someone in power will disapprove?

Herod, Herodius and Salome are all characters who we love to hate and blame. They are convenient scapegoats on which to blame the weakness of the human character. Herod was a weak and frightened man. He knew John to be a righteous and holy man to whom he liked to listen and yet, he could not withstand the request of his strong-willed wife. Herodius, the wife, was a vengeful person, hating John because he called her to account for her actions. Salome was a child under the control of her powerful mother. Fear, misused power, vengeance, and weakness of will all came together to cause the death of John.

Let's be honest, John, by all accounts was not a likeable character. He wore funny clothes, ate odd food, and spoke the truth in a harsh and uncompromising manner. John was not a gentle and soothing person. In spite of that Herod, a thoroughly secular person saw something in John that touched his spirit. He liked to listen to John. Maybe it was John's strength. Even in the face of prison and possible death John did not give an inch. Maybe it was the message itself. It may have been a combination of many things. It was grace.

Grace, that quality of God's presence that makes itself known to all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. It has been called one of the crucial eccentricities of Christianity; the declaration that we are saved by grace. It is not anything we can earn. Grace is that gift of God that often comes when we are at a crossroads and must make a choice. But, like all gifts and especially gifts of God, we can choose to accept or reject it. We all come to places in our lives when we can no longer continue as we have been. We come to the place of decision and choice like John Newton, the captain of the slave ship who came to see that the slave trade was wrong. That insight led him to change his life. He wrote of that change in that favorite hymn "Amazing Grace". To accept or reject grace, the choice is ours.

Grace is what supports us in choosing faithfulness when such choice is costly. Choosing faithfulness is rarely easy and always with cost. In some cases, the cost may seem small except to the person who is making the choice to remain faithful. In other cases, there is a visible and enormous cost. History is filled with people we know of who with grace chose faithfulness. It is filled with many more unknown to most of us, who also made the choice for faithfulness.

Often we think of those who chose faithfulness, especially early in the history of the Christian church as martyrs. There were many who made choices for the gospel even when it meant death. There were many as well who chose faithfulness and did not pay the price of death, but became witnesses by how they lived, by what they did and who they were.

Agnes was one who paid great cost. She was a child of 12 when in Rome she was tortured and eventually burned at the stake under the persecution of the emperor Diocletian. The early records are full of people, women and men who in spite of great pain refused offer

worship to other gods and so died for their faith. Many more through the centuries have lived for that same faith. People known and unknown who lived their lives according to the gospel becoming faithful and prophetic witnesses. Scripture tells of three women, Dorcus, Lydia and Phoebe who were such witnesses. Lydia a seller of rare purple dye, was a gatherer. Herself a convert from Judaism, gathered women to share her faith. Dorcus was known in her community as a Christian woman who witnessed through acts of charity and good works. Phoebe used her resources to provide a place for the Christians to gather safely. Together with Aquila and Priscilla, tentmakers, Paul, Timothy, and Barnabas, these all chose to be faithful to the call of God to them.

Down through the centuries people of faith, famous and unknown, martyred, and long-lived witnesses, have chosen to accept the call of God to them personally, and to receive the gift of grace that enabled them to do the work they were called to do. To list them all would be the work of several volumes. While the stories of the martyrs continued to fascinate, there were far more people much like each of us who answered when called to faithfulness by witness in their lives.

Coming to the late 19th and 20th centuries, there continue to be countless examples. Some have been made famous others continue to be known to a few and some to God alone. Bishop Oscar Romero, 9 Jesuit priests and 4 Maryknoll nuns were killed in El Salvador in the 1980's. They all had accepted the grace that enabled them to be faithful witnesses even to death. In Memphis Tennessee, in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1874, a group of Episcopal nuns belonging to the Order of Sisters of St. Mary, together with clergy and lay Christians stayed in the city nursing those who were ill and caring for the children made orphan by the epidemic. These people, who were much like you and me, chose to be faithful witnesses in the face of difficult and dangerous circumstances. In the civil rights marches of the 1960's a seminarian, Jonathan Daniels stepped in front of a shot gun blast to save the life of a young black girl. Many more people in the 19th and 20th century, have accepted the call and grace of God to be witnesses by their lives and actions. Father Damien among the leper colony in Hawaii is an example. He, together with little remembered Marianne Cope, ministered to the people who had been abandoned and shunned by their society. During the 2nd World War, in Europe, thousands of Christians courted danger and endured sacrifices to save Jews from the Holocaust. These righteous gentiles are honored for their courageous action at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial overlooking Jerusalem. One who might serve as an image of the many is Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese Consul in Lithuania. He rescued thousands of Jews by providing them with travel credentials to enable them to escape. In doing so he violated Japan's official policy and was removed from foreign service, living the rest of his life in disgrace.

I am reminded of the hymn in our hymnal, the first verse of which starts like this: 'I sing a song of the saints of God, Patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew...'. The final verse sums up the whole. "...for the saints of God are just folks like me, and I mean to be one too.

Those who choose to be faithful witnesses are folks just like you and like me, people who choose to live faithfully and were given the grace to do so wherever they found themselves. God asks each of us to be witnesses in our own way. No matter what the cost, large or small, God always gives us the grace to that witness as well.