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Proper 10B - Ordinary 15B - Pentecost +6
Sunday, July 12, 2009
Mark 6: 14-29

Responsibility

King Herod heard of it, 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."¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."¹⁶ 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.¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,²⁰ 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.²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.²² 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."²³ And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."²⁵ 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."²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Have you ever been asked to do something (or maybe even just go along with something) that you know, deep inside, is the wrong thing to do?

Sometimes those things happen to us all. I know that when I was your age there were even a few times that I got myself into trouble for doing things that if I'd really thought through, I probably would have decided against. The problem always was: my friends were doing them too – and I'd been too afraid for some reason to tell them "no."

That can be awfully tough, can't it? When you see your friends doing something that's maybe against the rules – or doing something dangerous, or wrong? It seemed like whenever those things happened, I'd try to explain it to my parents by saying that "everyone else was doing it" or "he told me to!" And they always told me the same thing: The choices we make are ours – and so we have to take personal responsibility. To be responsible means that – no matter what - you're in charge of making your own decisions.

This week's gospel story is one of the most unusual we've had to talk about. Instead of a story about Jesus and the lessons he taught us, this week's story is about a King (King Herod). And unlike so many of the gospel stories that make us feel good inside, this is a very sad story. It's one of the most horrible in the entire Bible.

King Herod is having a birthday party – and during the party his daughter does a dance so beautiful that he tells her he'll grant her a wish. Whatever she wants, she can have. And here's where the story becomes so hard to hear. She tells him that she wants him to do something very wrong – to kill a man.

And now Herod has a choice. He's made her a promise to grant her wish, but what she asks for is something terrible.

What would you have told her? (Solicit children's answers.)

I agree. I think that I would have to break the promise rather than do such an awful thing. But Herod makes another choice. He sends his guards to kill the man, just so he can keep his promise. It's a sad story – one so sad that even many grownups wonder what can be learned from it.

I've thought a lot about that this week – and decided that for me, this story is a reminder that we are sometimes asked to make choices that we just know would be wrong – and how important it is to have the strength and the courage to say no. Even when taking responsibility is a hard thing to do.

Only you can make those choices. So next time you're asked, will you do a better job than Herod and remember that you're responsible for the things you do?

Good. Let's pray.

Dear God,

Sometimes we are faced with such hard choices. Fill us with the wisdom and strength we need to live our lives in a way that you may find pleasing.

Amen