

Owning It

Mark 6: 14-29

Home Moravian Church, July 14, 2024

Who would a powerful politician say that you are?

That's a silly question. Likely a powerful politician doesn't *know* who you are. Most of fly under political radar by going quietly about our lives. Drawing the attention of the powerful requires making a lot of noise.

Jesus, of course, made noise—or, rather, he inspired noise, as everyone began talking about him. Sometimes people *argued* about him, increasing the noise level. In Mark chapter 8, he *quieted* a storm, but that only created more noise: conversation, consternation, exclamation.

Knowing that everyone was talking about him, in Chapter 9 he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets.”

And they could have added, “But you already knew that.” Because this kind of conversation had already been reported in chapter 6—as we heard just a moment ago.

By chapter 6, Jesus' name had reached even the ears of Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea. And sure enough, even then, some were saying Jesus was John the Baptist; others were saying he was “a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” It's essentially the same conversation we'll see in chapter 8, but with a big difference in the conclusions drawn. In Chapter 8, Peter proclaimed Jesus as Messiah; In Chapter 6, Herod mistook Jesus for someone else: “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” Peter named Jesus as one to whom he would surrender his life. Herod mistook Jesus for one whose life Herod owned.

“John, whom I beheaded”: See how Herod gives himself the starring role? Herod declares himself the owner of John’s life. And then comes a flashback to explain John’s death. A flashback is an unusual departure from Mark’s swift-moving narrative of Jesus’ rapidly expanding ministry. But flashback is also foreshadowing: The flashback to John the Baptist asks, How did things work out for someone who made previously made noise? The answer is: Not well.

Herod had had John arrested because John’s noisemaking was disturbing his personal peace. Herod had married his brother’s divorced wife, Herodias, and John had been telling him, “Your marriage is against Jewish law.” Whether this bothered Herod, we don’t know, but it bothered Herodias to the point where she wanted to kill John. Being a woman, she of course had no power to do so; but Herod? He could do whatever he wanted. Herod *owned* John.

I’m struck by Herod’s emotional reactions to John. Actually, it seems that Herod was, overall, an emotional person, sensitive to the vibe in the room. Sensitive enough to recognize in John the presence of the holy, and wise enough to *fear* that presence—to fear it even more than he feared his wife’s anger, and to protect John from her. What an interesting dynamic this must have created in the royal household!

The text goes on to say that John’s preaching *perplexed* Herod, and yet Herod *liked* to listen to him. Again with the feelings! Being perplexed by John was somehow pleasant, to the point that Herod actually *liked* to listen to John. Did Herod feel a tingle in his scalp, a prickling in his eyes? Even if his conscience was as yet untroubled—to wear the mantle of power may require some adjustments to one’s conscience—he found it pleasant to be forced to *think*.

The power dynamic decreed that John was Herod’s to save or not, to protect or to dispense with. Yet, for a time, we can see how the dynamic became more complicated—and

more promising. Between ruler and holy man, an emotional connection created possibility. The possibility of relationship; of discovery; of change.

I can't help thinking of Pontius Pilate with Jesus standing before him. How Pilate questioned and was questioned by Jesus, challenged and was challenged by Jesus; how Pilate was amazed by Jesus, how Pilate struggled to understand Jesus. How Pilate was clearly *perplexed* by Jesus, and at the same time, seems to have wanted to listen to him. How it might have felt good to Pilate, for a time, to be made to think. How, between ruler and holy man, there was an emotional connection, creating, for a moment, the possibility of relationship. And discovery. And change.

As I read about Herod, and thought about Pilate, I kept thinking of the phrase "inflection point." I hear that a lot these days, but to be sure of the meaning, I looked it up. Since I have not had a math class since 11th-grade algebra, I am very excited to use, with authority, this phrase from differential calculus: *Inflection point*: "The point on a smooth plane curve at which the curvature changes sign." In literature, including scripture, an inflection point is where relationships, circumstances, and decisions flow together to create the possibility that the story will turn in a new direction.

But it is only a possibility.

Well, the time came for Herod to celebrate his birthday. For this occasion, he held a banquet for all the important people in Galilee. As part of the festivities, in came the daughter of his wife Herodias to entertain the guests with a dance.

If here you picture something sensuous, involving a lot of scarves, please know that's what other sources, from the ancient historian Josephus to Hollywood screenwriters, have done to our imaginations. For all we know from the *actual text*, this dancing daughter could have

been a five-year-old showing off her tap lessons. No matter. All we need to know is that Herod and the guests were pleased, and Herod—remember, he was an emotional guy—declared that he'd give the girl anything she wished, even half his kingdom. Whatever he owned, he was prepared to spend.

One rash promise, and the drama rushes to its brutal conclusion. The girl goes back to her mother: "What should I ask for?" "The head," replies the mother, "of John the baptizer."

Listen to how the story accelerates: *Immediately* the girl *rushed* back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me *at once* the head of John the Baptist." It all happens so fast. However much Herod has enjoyed being made to think, now, there is no time to think.

When we are under pressure, we just want our discomfort to stop; and we grab for whatever we can control. Herod can control what happens to John the Baptist. Herod, in fact, owns John the Baptist; and whatever he owns, he can spend. It's a small price to pay for relief of his anxiety. Not too far in the future, Pilate will make a similar calculation. It's a calculation power has made throughout history.

But does it ever really work? Well, it didn't for Herod. His anxiety will persist. When he hears about the miraculous deeds of Jesus, his first thought is: *John. John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.* He owned John; but John's death now seems to own him.

Herod reached an inflection point, and passed it. He chose to persist in the same direction, ignoring what John had preached. He walked away from the opportunity for repentance. He walked right past righteousness, turned his back on the holy. He walked away from an emotional connection, and from the possibility of relationship, discovery, change. He just kept going in the same old way, leaving behind him the call to another life.

Face to face with holiness, Herod had the opportunity to release control into the loving hands of a much greater power. Instead, he chose to reassert the power of his worldly office, and in so doing, destroyed a righteous life. Why? Because he feared the power of others to make his life uncomfortable. For example, his wife, who, in her own struggle for power, used the person *she* owned—her daughter—to get what she wanted. The daughter, absolutely powerless, could remain comfortable only by pleasing her mother. And in that culture of honor and shame, everyone at the party had the power to make Herod uncomfortable if they saw him go back on a very public promise. Which just goes to show you that Herod didn't have as much power as he liked to think.

Herod reached an inflection point; but instead of changing direction, he went on the same old way. The world, too, went on the same old way, so much the same way that eventually, all the power dynamics between Herod and John would play out again between Pilate and Jesus, with the same result.

Or so it seemed.

But here's the thing—you all know this: Pilate didn't actually own Jesus, any more than Herod owned John the Baptist. The only owner of all our lives is God; and God will assert God's ownership.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the moment when God asserted God's ownership of every life and every power, even the power of death. And that was history's great inflection point: the moment when everything changed. Even though the resurrection was first made known on a very quiet morning, it made so much noise that one day the whole world would be talking about it. We're still talking about it.

God will assert God's ownership. Thanks to God's gracious action in the resurrection of Jesus, we know that even death does not own us. And if even death does not own us, we can be sure that no power on earth does, either.

Who would a powerful politician say you are? Does it matter? That kind of power probably cares less about who we are than about how much it hopes to own us. But God will assert God's ownership—not by cutting off our heads, but by offering us grace.

Before I go on, I want you to know that I finished this sermon yesterday, around noon. I knew nothing about the assassination attempt on a presidential candidate until I turned on my computer at 8:00 this morning.

Experienced preachers will tell you that sometimes, events will sometimes require that you tear up a finished sermon and very quickly write another. I did not feel the need to tear up my sermon this morning. I had spent the week thinking about the powers of the world, and the power of God. Nothing that happened yesterday has made me think any differently about who holds the real power.

But I was hesitant to stick with my original ending, which advocated for us to be noisemakers. I want to say, very clearly, that making noise is not the same thing as making violence. A grab for a gun is just another grab for power, a scramble for control in a time of unbearable pressure and anxiety. The madness in our politics seems to be accelerating: *Immediately, rushed, at once.* We need to step back and let grace calm us down.

Jesus did not make violence; but he did make noise. He made noise by doing things that people noticed, and talked about. Healing, feeding, blessing. That's the kind of noisemaking that should draw the attention of this world's powers. That's the kind of noisemaking that might cause them to wonder who we are.

Who do we say we are? Let the powers ask; we'll tell them ourselves. Who owns us? Let the powers ask; we know the answer. Let the powers be perplexed! They may find that they like to listen. They may find how good it feels to be forced to think. Maybe their thinking will connect to our noisemaking in a way that creates a connection; and maybe that connection will create possibility. The possibility of relationship; of discovery; of change. May it be so, through the grace extended to all, by the one who owns us all. Amen.