

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JULY 15, 2018 AT

BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Three elderly Jewish men who were childhood friends meet at a party many years later and start talking. The first one says, "So, did you hear, I've been in the jewelry business. I've been very, very successful. In fact, I even changed my name to Mr. Diamond." The second man says, "I've also been very successful and I've been in the precious metals business. I changed my name to Mr. Silver. The two look at the third man and say, "So?" The third man says, "Well, I was a tailor. At first I didn't do too well. First I was a tailor for men, then I tried being a tailor for women, but I had no luck. So one Friday night when I was at the synagogue, I prayed to God, "Please, God, find a good business for me and I'll make you a partner." So the other two looked at him and said, "So?" He responded, "What's the matter, you never heard of Lord and Taylor?"ⁱ

Ah, nothing like a good Jewish story as a segue into the serious matters presented in the Gospel lesson for today, all of which centers on the later life of John the Baptist, who was executed through vengeance and scorn thanks to Herodias, Herod's wife. We just heard the story read, and though it is of a historical nature, and helps to move the story line along, one has to wonder what it is doing in this portion of the *Gospel of Mark*, other than it does foreshadow, perhaps, the kind of death Jesus and his disciples were to die as payback for their works that challenged the political and religious authorities of the day. Herod feared John, and protected him, but apparently did not fear him as much as he did his wife, her daughter and his cronies, so he allows John's beheading to proceed even though it may not have been in

his best interests. The time will come again when he has to make a similar decision regarding Jesus, one where he is more astute, for he can see why the religious authorities around Jesus are jealous of him. Herod knows what jealousy can do, as his father had adeptly demonstrated when out of fear he commanded that all young Jewish male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem be slaughtered in attempt to stave off his own demise. It seems that Jesus was always just a Herod away from death...

To understand the intrigue of this story one needs a kind of genealogical scorecard, as the Herod family tree is both complex and disturbing. Herod the Great (the Herod of Jesus' infancy and of the tale of the Magi) married several women who bore him seven sons. Herodias, the major player of this episode in John's and Jesus' life, is the daughter of one of these seven sons and marries two of the other seven sons—which means that both of her husbands are also her uncles, and she married her-brother-in-law while still married to her husband. Herod the Great was quite paranoid, and murdered three of his seven sons for fear that they might try to depose him.ⁱⁱ Of the remaining four sons, three marry either Herodias or Herodias' daughter. Hence any of Herod's relatives must have spent a goodly amount of their lives looking over their shoulders for fear that someone might stab them in the back. Herodias was not about to take a slight about her marriage from anyone, especially from someone whom her husband admired, because it weakened her own position.

She aptly demonstrates that her power is not to be tested, and she ends up in a place that suits her fine, with the head of John the Baptist on a platter before her and all of Herod's guests. We learn that John's disciples, many of whom then go on to be disciples of Jesus, request his

body for burial, like Joseph of Arimathea does later on in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. But one must ask, I think, what does telling the story of Herodias and John the Baptist have to do with Jesus, other than the foreshadowing I mentioned earlier? What are we to learn from it that will fill our souls for this week? Appearing as it does at this time in history, I think the message that we might take away from it is that horrible things do happen, even to entire groups of people, yet if we are constant in our belief in God, a belief that can help us more than just muddle through, and when we sustain our faith and examine its impact on our lives, we are able to bear the changes that confront us from all kinds and sorts of evil actions by those leaders we thought we could trust the most. I think of the panic that has set in the minds of those who have the greatest at stake in the appointment of a new Supreme Court justice, namely those in the pro-choice and LGBTQ movements. They must be wondering, as am I, how to stand up to and not be afraid in the face of changes that will surely alter the very being of our souls.

That is the question of the day. For those of us who are sore afraid, how do we stand up to evil, injustices that are not even universally perceived and shared? I have already suggested prayer as something we must be vigilant about, prayer for all sorts and conditions of humankind, prayer for us who feel oppressed, prayer for those who do not agree with our point of view that they might not feel further marginalized and backed into a corner so that they look and act out of an oppression that further isolates us, one from another. In response to my sermon two weeks ago, the outreach committee of the church met and agreed to designate \$4000 of our outreach funds to aid programs that seek to reunite families recently torn apart by an

aggressive and ill conceived immigration policy emanating from uninformed and malicious rhetoric and a paranoia that has no basis in reality and is truly cruel and inhumane. I don't know if we will ever recover our dignity and our sense of national justice from the actions taken in recent weeks, but what we voted to do is one positive step for a small church. Next we need to link with other like-minded and well-intentioned people and organizations to try to effect greater remediation. That will take strong lay leadership and a willingness to listen to all sides of the arguments at hand so that we can make a change. I think of Michael Jackson's powerful lyrics from his hit, "Man in the Mirror":

I'm gonna make a change
For once in my life
It's gonna feel real good
Gonna make a difference
Gonna make it right

As I, turn up the collar on
My favorite winter coat
This wind is blowing my mind
I see the kids in the streets
With not enough to eat
Who am I to be so blind?
Pretending not to see their needs

A summer disregard, a broken bottle top
And a one man soul
They follow each other on the wind ya' know
'Cause they got nowhere to go
That's why I want you to know

I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change

I've been a victim of a selfish kind of love
It's time that I realize
That there are some with no home, not a nickel to loan
Could it be really me, pretending that they're not alone?
A willow deeply scarred, somebody's broken heart
And a washed-out dream
They follow the pattern of the wind ya' see
'Cause they got no place to be
That's why I'm starting with me

I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a changeⁱⁱⁱ

And once again Mahatma Gandhi is in my thoughts. He said: "We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."^{iv} This quote is often paraphrased as "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Transformationist speaker Joseph Ranseth says that if we can do the inner work that is necessary to make that change (and we all know what it entails: To examine ourselves openly, honestly, vulnerably and to purge out any resemblance of selfishness, depravity or insecurity.) If we can do this,

1. It stops us from judging others;
2. It replaces complaining about others with reflection on self;
3. It stirs us into taking action within the only thing in the world over which we have any power: ourselves.^v

Gandhi's power came from this inner work. When asked by a reporter "what his secret was" to gain such power over the ruling British empire, he responded: "I try to make myself zero." He was referring to developing such a selfless love that each thought, word and deed was motivated for the welfare and well-being of others, and not for his own gratification. Gandhi was able to have as broad of reach as he did because he went as deep as he did. He had purified himself so that he was motivated by love for others.^{vi}

Would that we could and were willing to do even a tiny bit of what Gandhi and Jackson ask of us, because we have to admit that even a small portion of moving into a "change arena" (living a life of change) can and will make a difference. When I was making my doctoral proposal before the seminary committee, they set a high standard where topics were concerned. They were not interested in any project or writing that was not specifically transformative. I watched my colleagues create and present projects and theses that were life-changing for themselves and the community that they served, and I was able to be part of that movement also. It is amazing what intentionality will do, can do, can continue to do.

Therefore, along with public and private prayers and donation of funds that will help make an impact, we can add to our Christian responsibility, our Disciples of Christ promise, to pledge to make a change and help others see in themselves and their/our joint work that which recreates life. Don't you long for, as I know I do, a vision of life, a way of living that captivates and takes one into newness instead of the same old melancholia? I long to give up the laziness of the soul, the unwillingness to get involved because it is all so overwhelming and make a least one step in a positive direction. What will that be? I'm reminded of the story of the minister and a farmer who on a very cold, snowy Sunday in February arrived at the church. The minister said, "Well, I guess we won't have a service today." To which the farmer replied, "Heck, if only one cow shows up at feeding time, I feed it."

All that's to say that I'm willing to start with even one other person who will stand at the mirror with me. St. Paul tells us that at the mirror we will find faith, hope, and love. To be sure, there is a lot of room there, and it will be a "good reflection" on our church were you willing to stand up and see what we can do as a worshipping community, one committed to the good works we uncover as we seek to live out our calling together to be the body of Christ.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ Tapper, Al. *A Minister, A Priest, and A Rabbi*.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-614-29/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bing.com/search?q=man+in+themirror&form=EDGEAR&q=PF&cvid=37b8e3d4ed0044cdac47f4dc617bcefb&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

^{iv} <https://josephranseth.com/gandhi-didnt-say-be-the-change-you-want-to-see-in-the-world/>

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*