

12 July 2015 (7th Sunday After Pentecost/15th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Lives Sacred and Transcendent”
Mark 6:14-29

Some years ago I was invited by a colleague of mine to preach at his church for a couple of Sundays while he was on vacation. And so I put together the information that the church secretary would need for the bulletin—Scripture readings, sermon title, hymns, prayers, etc. For one of the Sundays, the psalm for the day was the 116th Psalm. It was and still is one of my favorites, because it thanks God for hearing the author’s cry for help, and for delivering him from death. The psalmist also makes a commitment to walk with God in the land of the living, and to praise God forever in the temple. It is elegant and beautifully written, a real gem in the treasury of psalms. One of the verses from Psalm 116 that I had included in the Call to Worship reads thus: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” But when the church secretary read what I had submitted for the bulletin, she said, “I don’t think you should use that verse. I don’t like that.” Surprised, I replied, “Why not?” She said, “I just don’t think it’s appropriate. I think you should leave it out.” I tried to explain the context of the verse, that the psalmist had been close to death, and believed that had he died, God would not have forgotten him—but she was unmoved. I ended up having to insist that that verse be included in the Call to Worship.

All these years later, I still think about that exchange, and I wonder, What was it about associating God’s love with the death of God’s saints that was so problematic for this woman? I suppose that she must have understood the verse in question to be saying that God rejoices over or approves of the untimely deaths of faithful and blessed disciples. But that’s not what the text of the psalm says at all. Rather, in the same way that we remember and value someone who dies, so also does God value those who are faithful, even in death. In fact, they are as precious to God because of their deaths as they were beloved to God in the course of their lives. What a tremendous comfort that verse is—and yet, it requires us to acknowledge that, under the umbrella of God’s providence, even the saints, the faithful who love God and love the world in Jesus’ name, are not immune from suffering untimely, violent deaths. God does not forget the saints, but neither does God prevent their sacrifice.

The grisly story of the death of John the Baptist in Mark Chapter 6 offers a challenge to those who struggle to understand how God can allow such awful things to happen to the very ones God loves. We are, of course, still reeling from the massacre of nine brothers and sisters in faith three weeks ago in Charleston. We cannot forget even as we don’t like to think about the beheadings of God’s beloved at the hands of ISIS. For that matter, we don’t even know a fraction of the number of saints who die every day at the hands of people who are filled with hate, who are without conscience, or who suffer themselves from demons they cannot control. In the context of Mark’s Gospel, the death of John the Baptist is meant to remind the reader of the power of John’s life despite the forces of evil that wanted to see him dead. John’s was a life sacred and transcendent, a

prophetic witness so enduring that Herod could not shake its memory long after he had presided over the ugly execution he promised to Herodias's daughter.

But the flashback to John's death fulfills another function as well. It foretells the suffering and death of Jesus. As we have seen, this particular portion of Mark's Gospel is really not as much devoted to the life of John the Baptist as it is to the ministry of Jesus. And yet, for some reason, Mark sees fit to recall John's death in the context of Jesus' rejection by the people of his hometown, and the disciples' success in carrying the healing power of Jesus into the towns and villages they entered in his name. Why would he do that? Mark suggests that the news of the disciples' works of healing spread, and that when these stories reached Herod, he became convinced that John the Baptist had been resurrected. Was this a classic case of guilt, Herod haunted by the evil he had perpetrated against a prophet whom he respected and feared? Mark's narrative certainly gives us that impression. But Mark's purpose in recalling the death of John the Baptist seems directed to a larger point to which his Gospel is headed: death cannot quench a life sacred and transcendent. Herod's guilt moved him to conclude that John had been resurrected. If he felt that way about John, Mark is asking, what will he do with Jesus?

In our life together as the body of the resurrected Christ, we too often forget that we are not in charge of the life of the church. This church, or any church for that matter, has not come about as a result of a congenial group of people getting together one night over dinner, and by the time dessert rolled around, deciding between mouthfuls of chocolate cake that they should form a church. Human agency is not responsible for the church. I know that Lafayette's charter documents the names of families who organized this congregation in 1947. But they were not the power behind it. We will never forget their legacy as saints, but when we gather for worship, we don't sing praises to them. We sing praise to God alone, without whom there is no such thing as a life sacred and transcendent. The great mystery of the lives of the saints is that it isn't about them. Lives sacred and transcendent are always and everywhere about God alone.

The church where I preached for my colleague all those years ago where the church secretary wanted to edit Psalm 116, was in my former presbytery. I say "was" because I recently learned that that congregation had dissolved. At the time, probably about 20 years ago, it was a struggling church that was slowly unraveling around the edges, like a fraying piece of cloth that no one is paying much attention to. And like an old piece of cloth, this particular church had grown accustomed to huddling together every Sunday to see the same people, sing the same hymns, and follow the same routines and rituals, as though they were living in a time capsule from the 1950's. They were very much unto themselves. Spiritually speaking, the doors and windows were closed, shut off from the world and from the Holy Spirit. I am not suggesting that the members didn't mean well or that they didn't love Jesus, but rather that they loved who they were more than who they could have become. Unfortunately, we will never know what might have been, had they been able to venture forth the way Jesus' disciples ventured into unknown towns and villages, risking rejection, but willing to trust the Spirit's leading and energy working through them. That was the energy that healed and transformed people's lives, and that generated all kinds of shared stories that made it back to Herod and haunted him

as he remembered the power of John the Baptist. But that kind of energy seemed to frighten this church. They clung to each other to the end.

What we learn from lives sacred and transcendent—like John the Baptist, like the nine members of Mother Emanuel, like all the saints throughout time who have witnessed to the power of God’s love with their lives—what we learn from them is that life lived in the Spirit of God requires risk. If we claim to follow Jesus but shrink from venturing where Jesus calls, how will the world ever know what our lives stand for? If we claim to be the body of the resurrected Christ but limit the church’s life to our own ideas, and continually subject it to our control, how will the world ever see Jesus? If we wish to live lives sacred and transcendent, we cannot be afraid to look outside of ourselves and beyond ourselves where Christ is calling us to look. The reading today from 2 Samuel reminds us that what made King David great was his willingness to love God and celebrate God’s presence with abandon. Twice in that text we are told that David danced before the Lord “with all his might”—he threw his entire body into it, so much so that he embarrassed his wife and she despised him for making a fool of himself in praise of God. What does a church look like that lives and celebrates the life of Christ with abandon, leaping and dancing with the joy of the Spirit in the midst of a world that suffers from weariness, hopelessness, and boredom? Such a church does not fear rejection, or death. Such a church is unstoppable.

This past week, as I watched the short but powerful ceremony in which the Confederate flag was removed from the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol once and for all, I was reminded of the Berlin Wall coming down almost 26 years ago—it was that kind of milestone event, a decisive turning point in which one can actually see the reach of the arc of justice. Could that have happened a month ago? Could that flag have come down before the events of June 17th? What stood for 51 years came down in three weeks. Why? Because of the lives of God’s saints, sacred and transcendent, whose deaths are precious in God’s sight. As the body of the resurrected Christ in this time and place, we have been chosen to venture forth and bear witness to the love of Jesus to people who are earnestly seeking life in all its fullness. The Apostle Paul reminds us of the spiritual blessings with which God has blessed us, and the destiny in which we participate alongside all the saints—meaning that, in our mission, we can’t fail, because God has already determined to gather up heaven and earth in Jesus Christ. If we are living lives sacred and transcendent, we cannot fail, the church cannot fail. God’s justice, love, and mercy make us unstoppable, in life and in death.



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