

July 14, 2024

St. Paul's Cleveland Heights

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We come this morning to be nourished and to restore ourselves by resting in the love and presence of God.

In that context, today we heard a gospel tale of gruesome violence.

This story offers us many things to reflect on, and what I'd like to focus on is the attention it draws to ***the need for the healing of human blindness*** - a prominent theme throughout the gospels.

This gospel theme is not about physical blindness in which visual perception is low or non-existent. That type of blindness is not an obstacle to our wholeness or our capacity to be fully alive in God, in truth.

The gospel theme of healing blindness is speaking to the *inner* blindness caused by things like cultural conditioning, fear, and pride. It's also due to our innate need to learn to use the fullness of inner vision that we have. An immense cosmic and sacred power, this inner vision. We are all called to heal our blindness and to live into our gift of inner sight.

The King Herod in today's gospel is the son of the more famous King Herod the Great, who we know from the birth narratives of Christ. He heard that the magi, the 3 wise men, were following a star to find the newborn Messiah and asked them to tell him where the Messiah was, saying he wanted to go adore him, too. But he secretly wanted to kill the baby Christ to eliminate any threat to his own power. When the magi disobeyed this, the king ordered all male babies to be killed.

His son Herod of today's gospel had ¼ of his father's dominion after it was divided between 4 brother inheritors. This Herod is called a king, because he was popular, but his actual title was *tetrarch*, which literally means one fourth, but in common usage meant prince.

So this Herod has a legacy to prove, and power to guard. And he was taught that a massacre of innocent humans is a viable way to do that, to survive.

So, at a party celebrating him, showing off his regalia and power to all the courtiers, officers, leaders of Galilee, he publicly promises his daughter Herodias anything at all as a reward for her beautiful dancing in his honor. She asks her mother for advice about what to ask for and her mother tells her to ask for the decapitated head of a human being, John the Baptist, on a platter, right now.

Her mother has a grudge against John for telling the king what she didn't want to hear - that her marriage to the King was unrighteous and unlawful, because she was the wife of his brother.

Herod had already imprisoned John to placate his wife, and he'd been trying to protect John's life because he sensed he was a holy man and was intrigued by his teachings. Yet, now, Herod felt he couldn't break his promise to his daughter and look bad, especially before his powerful guests. So, going against what he saw in John, and as though sending someone out to a store to pick up a necklace

or some gift, he dispatches a soldier to behead a man, a prophet, the herald of Christ, and to come back with the horrific gift on a platter.

The players of this tale were blinded by fear, pride, power, and intergenerational conditioning about killing others to survive and hold power. They were blind to their own blindness.

The truth is we all are blind and blind to our blindness. But we have the opportunity from this ugly story to be humble enough to acknowledge our blindness and work to heal it and thereby contribute to healing humanity's blindness.

This healing really matters – to our souls, to our realization of the promises of God, and to our lives as we live them in our short time on earth. It matters to our larger world - including this time here and now in our country, when divisiveness in our politics is leading to greater fear and deeper blindness and more violence, such as the politically based violence we saw yesterday at the rally in Pennsylvania.

Our violence illustrates the heartbreaking center of all human sadness -- that by blindness we are led to senselessly hurt and kill one another in the name of achieving our heart's desires. This is especially heartbreaking given that we have such incredible powers for love, imagination and wisdom, goodness, conscious connection with God, courage, and the power to see the sacred Truth.

We each individually have the choice to contribute to the healing of the kind of human blindness that resulted in Herod the Great's massacre of innocent babies, in his son's choice to behead a prophet as a gift to a child, and in countless examples throughout the ages, and now.

It's always easier to see the blindness of others – in Herod, or the people who live in our house. We always want to point it out to them, to help them out.

We can also see the blindness that we had in our past more easily and it brings regret. We want to relive it. *If only I'd seen. . .*

But it's harder to see the blindness we ourselves are living in here and now.

We need humility and courage to admit that we too are blind.

We too participate in violence due to our fear, pride, conditioning, even if just in mean words or by things left undone. We too may be killing the herald of Christ within us, stamping out the voice inside calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, especially if the voice is pointing out things we don't want to see.

Even the disciples, walking with Jesus in the flesh day by day, had to learn to see more fully.

They continually revealed their assumptions that made them blind to seeing who Jesus was. They thought they knew, so it blocked their vision of what was being revealed.

We too can believe our assumptions to be knowledge, perhaps not even noticing our assumptions as assumptions, and this blocks our powerful gift of vision. When we think we know already, we miss it.

In this massive human trance, we are partially asleep. On the auspicious night before he died, Jesus implored the disciples: "Stay awake. Keep watch with me." Calling them, and us, to commit to being awake and seeing what is.

In John, chapter 9, Jesus says “I came into this world so that those who do not see may see . . . And some of the learned teachers there said, ‘Surely *we* are not blind, are we?’ and Jesus said, “Now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

That is to say, their confusion remained. Until we know our own blindness and can therefore become open to being led to see anew, our confusion will remain.

St. Paul, our namesake, whose blessing is bestowed on this community, began his journey of following Christ by being struck down and having his full blindness revealed to him. Later, in being healed from that blindness, he experienced “something like scales falling from his eyes.” (Acts 9:18) We too are called to our own version of letting scales fall from our eyes, of losing the conditioned filters through which we see, letting go of our wanting to cling to what we think we know. It’s so vulnerable to do this.

Jesus tried in every way he could to lead us to see – through unexplainable acts of healing and loving, through teaching, through parables that challenge our thinking and turn it inside out, through being led to death while remaining awake in the Truth.

We are not powerless to our human blindness, nor to the circumstances of our times.

There are outer practices and inner practices that we can devote ourselves to that will bring us into the process in which we begin to more truly see.

In outer practices, we can engage in peacemaking and working for justice and serving those in need. We can communicate the good news and power of love in our actions. We can come here to remember what is true and be fed to become lions of courage in the world. We can live by the vision of Truth with all our heart and strength in our workplace, our families, our relationship with ourselves.

In inner practices, we can be led to fuller vision through prayer and contemplative practices and silence, letting our thoughts and ideas drop away so that we can see and feel the powerfully healing presence of God within our hearts, to be receptive to seeing within what Christ is *still* actively revealing to us, and to let it saturate our consciousness, our hearts, our being, and to be fortified by it and live by it.

I’d like to end by praying the Collect for Purity, which we often pray at the beginning of our liturgy.

I pray it for the healing of humanity’s innate capacity to see and live by the sacred underlying reality.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.