JOHN: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER
Psalm 24:1-10 and Mark 6:14-29

Tony went to the open house. It was perfect - their dream house. His wife would be joining him in a few weeks after selling their home in Knoxville and she would love it. The kids would love the huge back yard. This house had everything they ever wanted. But then he talked dollars and cents with the seller. It was more than he expected. He went back to the hotel and poured over the family budget figures of expenses and income again and again. It just wouldn’t work. The cost was too high.

Lacy always dreamed of owning her own studio. She had picked out the perfect location downtown and took her ideas to the architect. She laid out her vision for a small office and large, functional rooms for her dance students – rooms large enough for movement with grace so she could impart to them her love for dance. She went back the next week flush with excitement and filled with anticipation – but then she saw the figures – the dollars and cents – so much more than she expected. It just wouldn’t work. The cost was too high.

Judith left his woodworking shop unattended and joined with the others from his little village to go down to the River Jordan to see the prophet everyone was talking about – at least some said he was a prophet. Others said he was a crazy man – dressed in a coat of camel’s hair and eating a steady diet of locust and wild honey. Judith was poor – it would be a hardship to take a day off work because it would delay the delivery of the two cradles he was making – but he had heard so much about this man who called people to repent of their sins and be baptized in the waters of the Jordan – so he went. The shore leading up to the river was crowded with people – many just like him. As Judith approached the river he heard a voice above all the other voices – a booming voice proclaiming, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain shall be made low and the crooked shall be straightened and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Judith recognized the words from the great prophet Isaiah, recognized them as words calling all to make preparations for the coming of the Messiah of God, the One who would bring salvation to all the true children of God, the one who would stand up to the powers of Rome – the powers which now enslaved them and over-taxed them and kept them living in a state of barely surviving. Judith wanted to hear more from this man who cried out in the wilderness of the coming of the salvation of his people.

He moved closer to the man – he saw his wild look, his strange clothes, his un-cut hair and beard. He heard his booming voice. This time the prophet John became specific. Now his words were calling for those who were sincere in their repentance to do something – to show the fruit of their repentance. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Judith stopped in his tracks. What did he just hear? Judith worked hard to earn what he could to provide food and clothes for his family. How dare this man tie repentance to giving to others? How dare he tie the coming of the Messiah of God to giving to the poor? The Messiah was to come bringing great blessings to all the true children of God – not come asking them to
give more. If those were the demands of the Messiah for whom John prepared, Judith would not follow him. The cost was too high!

How much is too much? It’s a question we ask all the time. We see a shirt or a dress in a store window that we really like – but before we buy it we check the price tag. We know the healthy things we should eat – but many times the cost is higher, and we choose the unhealthier foods instead.

And when it comes to the choices we make to “bear the fruit of repentance” that is, the choices we make to show that we are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, we often count the cost before making the move to serve and give and love as Christ loves us.

John, the one we call the Baptizer, gave some very specific commands to the folks who came to him to be baptized. They came in response to his call to “repent and be baptized”. Baptism for John was a visible/experiential sign that a person was sorry for their sins AND wanted to live a different life – a life filled with service to others. In addition to speaking to those who had two coats and those who had food – commanding them to share - he also talked to tax-collectors saying, “collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” and to the soldiers saying, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations…”. What John calls the baptized to do is to share what we have with those who have less and treat everyone with fairness and justice. He doesn’t say anything about counting the cost first – he just says, “Do it”. Do it because you have repented of the sins of withholding from others and mistreating others and ignoring the needs of others – now go out and show that you have truly repented. Go out and do better.

We know that John did not “count” the cost before he waded into the Jordan and demanded that people repent and be baptized if they wanted to follow the way of the Messiah of God, and we know that he didn’t count the cost before he called the people who came to him “you brood of vipers!”, and we know that he did not count the cost before he spoke truth to power – that is, he rebuked King Herod “because he married Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod, the ruler, had done”. Some of those who came to the river contemplating baptism surely walked away unbaptized when they counted the cost – but John stood firm in his commitment to the coming Messiah whose path was one of loving and giving – and John stood firm in his resolve to speak the truth to those in power – even when it meant – as it did for John – his execution at the hands of those with (earthly) power.

Which brings us to our Gospel text for today – the gruesome story of the beheading of John. John could have considered the cost of speaking truth to power, the cost of confronting the king of his nation with the word of God that he sinned against God in marrying the wife of his brother. John had to have known that in speaking up he would suffer consequences, and when he was arrested by the men the king sent and thrown into prison, John had to have known that he could be, would be executed unless he recanted. John could have counted the cost – as we often do. And he could have decided that the cost was too high – as we often do. He could have recanted, backed down, took the easy way out – as we often do. But he didn’t. He remained faithful to God by speaking God’s truth to those in power.

The area of Iquitos, Peru known as San Juan celebrates the Festival of San Juan each year on June 23 and 24. They honor this man of faith and faithfulness to God with parades and picnics and special foods and celebrations – you do NOT want to try to travel through the streets of San Juan on those days unless you want to be delayed for hours – or just give up and join in the
festivities! We don’t celebrate a “St. John’s Day” – but maybe we should. Maybe we should take more seriously the message of this man of whom Jesus said, “I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John”. Not Abraham or Moses or King David or Elijah or Isaiah – no one – is greater than John – in the words of Jesus. I believe Jesus spoke those words because John prepared the way for the Messiah and because John laid out a detailed plan of how we can bear the fruits of repentance and also because John was faithful to the call of God to speak truth to power regardless of the consequences of that faith.

Those who put together the scripture passages for the Common Lectionary – those passages commended to us to read in worship each Lord’s Day – paired this story of the beheading of John with Psalm 24, a Psalm which speaks of worshippers gathered outside the Temple gates asking the question, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?” The answer given by the priest is “Those who have clean hands and pure heart, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.” Autur Weiser, renowned Old Testament scholar, wrote in his book The Psalms: A Commentary, “the immense greatness and force of the responsibility which is laid upon the faithful believer in the face of the demands made on him by God whose omnipotence imparts to these demands the character of absolute claims and imbes them with an ultimate and inescapable earnestness.” That is, in order to stand on the holy ground around the burning bush we heard about last week, or on the holy ground of this sanctuary, or on the holy ground anywhere on God’s earth, and claim that we are worthy to be there to worship God, we must come with clean hands and a pure heart – hands cleansed from the evil acts of pushing aside the needs of others; hands cleansed from the sin of thinking only of ourselves and giving into selfishness and hearts made pure by the fruits that come from our repentance. But what John reminds us of is that we come to God not as people somehow already clean and pure by our own doing, but as people who need to repent of our “dirty hands” and “unpure hearts” – and in the presence of God receive Grace.

In his Eulogy delivered following the mass murder of nine members of Mother Emmanuel AME church, President Obama reminded us that “we don’t earn grace. We’re all sinners. We don’t deserve it. But God gives it to us anyway. And we choose how to receive it.”

I chose the picture for the front of our bulletin today because it shows John speaking God’s word to a variety of people – common folks like Judith who left his carpentry shop and Roman soldiers steeped in their belief in Roman gods and Jewish leaders whose lives were filled with the daily worry that they might disobey even one of the pharisaical laws and be condemned. John’s word to “repent” was directed to each of them – to each of us. A word delivered with some harshness, “You brood of vipers”, but done so because John truly believed that there is a need for each of us, all of us, all God’s children to repent – and then go out and bear good fruit – be active and intentional in doing those things which will make a positive influence on the lives of others.

Our youth just finished their REACH workcamp week in upstate New York and we’ll hear wonderful stories from them when they return. They have been “bearing the fruit worthy of repentance”. Several years ago when I led our youth on another REACH workcamp in upstate New York my work crew of youth from around the country arrived on Monday morning at our neighbor’s home – a mobile home lived in by an 18 year old young man and his younger sister – who had some special needs. Their father had not been in the picture for many years and six months before we arrived their mother had abandoned them in this trailer that most of us
would have said was not “fit to live in”. The youth on our crew quickly understood the situation and worked long and hard that week to do all they could to make improvements on the home – and they entered into relationship with the young man and his sister – and impacted their lives in a positive way. Late in the week one of the girls on our work crew from Michigan said to me, “A week ago I would have driven past this trailer and said, ‘How could anyone live in a dump like that?’ Now I know Chuck and Sara and I will never think thoughts like that again!” Bearing the fruits of repentance!

But as important as his words were to common folks and Roman soldiers and Jewish religious leaders, it was not those words which lead to his death. No, his beheading came when he courageously spoke out against the evil of those in power, when he did not shy away from confronting those who had the power to hurt him, when he modeled for us the call of God to speak up from the depths of our faith when we see those in power leading in ways contrary to God’s word and way. John’s life and witness reminds us that our faith must not remain on “the holy hill” or in this sanctuary, but must direct us to speak truth to those in power, calling upon them to lead lives which “bear fruit worthy of repentance” as they demonstrate God’s compassionate care for the poor and oppressed and victimized of our society. Each one of us is called by John to “repent and bear fruit worthy of [that] repentance”, and like John we are each called by God to speak out of the depths of our faith to those in power today.

It may not be easy, it may come with some risks, it may come with heavy costs, we may have some fear, but as my Amish friends often reminded me, “Courage is fear on your knees”.

Let’s pray....

Lord, our hands are not clean and our hearts are not pure. We come to repent. We come also to be guided by your Spirit so that we will do and say those things which make a positive impact on the lives of others, including those in power, today and each day. Amen.