

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y25  
8 Pentecost (Proper 10B) 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.  
Sunday 15 July 2018

2 Sam. 6:1-5, 12b-19  
Psalm 24  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6:14-29

### **King Philosopher Television Celebrity**

*"King Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples, for Jesus' name had become known" (Mk. 6).*

I remember endless summer days as a four-year sitting in my plastic wheelbarrow on the grass. I pretended that it was my boat, safe on a vast green sea. On this magnificent day imagine this great cathedral with its redwood-like columns and stained-glass filtered light similarly as your haven of safety. No matter what storms may be gathering in your life, or in the society that surrounds us, we have found a joyful, beautiful place of peace.

What a blessing it is for us to be here! For twenty years I have been away on vacation during this week of the church year.<sup>1</sup> Today's stories feel so fresh and vivid to me. It's almost as if someone had discovered new passages from the Bible.

In this year of reading Mark's Gospel together we thought we knew what to expect – concise, compact, abrupt, simple – the unembellished skeleton of God's good news for us. And then today suddenly Mark stops being like Mark. Instead of being the writer who leaves the most up to our imagination, without warning he becomes the one to give us the overlooked details of a compelling story.

I think he does this to show our whole human predicament in a miniature form. In a single tragic story Mark brings us back to first principles, to the basic facts of existence, so that we can understand what we need to do in our complicated lives.

Mark tells us that Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs. They travel light through all the cities of the region. They ask people to repent. They cast out demons and heal those who are sick. They meet with such extraordinary success that even King Herod hears about their adventures. But just before they get back home to Jesus, before they can tell him what they have learned, Mark interjects what might seem like a parenthetical story about something that happened earlier (Mk. 6:30). It is the story of John the Baptist.

My dictionary says that the word apostle can mean Jesus' disciples, or important leaders of the early church, or the first missionaries in a new land. It comes from the Greek word *apostello* or "to send." Mark tells this story about two ways of being sent, about the two

paths that constantly open up in the journey of our own lives: the way of Herod and the way of Jesus.

Mark's story feels so contemporary. More than at any other time in my life we are entranced by the personalities of wealthy, powerful celebrities. We have been getting used to the experience of the personal suddenly breaking in to public life with enormous consequences.

To choose just one example it seems as if decisions about who gets pardoned and who stays condemned seem more arbitrary, more political than ever.<sup>2</sup> What could be more relevant today than a swaggering, bragging king delighted by his daughter's performance and distanced from his wife, making promises with life and death consequences, which he does not want to keep.

In the Cathedral's year of truth we notice that the ball starts rolling when John the Baptist speaks the truth. He points out that King Herod's marriage to his brother's wife is illegal. This offends Herod's wife who holds a grudge against him. She wants to kill him but has no power to do so. Herod sends (apostello) his henchmen to overpower John and put him in prison.

Herod comes to respect John's holiness, righteousness and goodness. He takes pleasure in hearing John talk even though he cannot always follow what John is saying.<sup>3</sup>

At his birthday banquet Herod's daughter dances so beautifully that he repeats his oath that he will give her anything even up to half his kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Filled with hate the girl's mother asks her for John the Baptist's head on a plate. Herod feels "deeply grieved" but everything happens quickly as he sends (apostello) his men to behead John in prison. This week I kept thinking about the shock John must have felt at this moment when the executioner arrived on the instruction of the king who felt connected to him.

The Greek word Mark uses for Herodias's grudge also means "entangled" (enexō) and that image defines this dysfunctional family.<sup>5</sup> Mark contrasts them with healthy families like Jairus who seeks healing for his daughter (Mk. 5:22).

And here we see how this story summarizes our human predicament. Each person in Herod's family wants to be loved but tragically cannot get what he or she really needs. Herod's wife wants to be valued and loved as queen and to not have anyone questioning the legitimacy of her position. At the same time she seems to have little power to satisfy her desire. She can only try to persuade, to use love to manipulate others. But even this is not enough to compel her husband to love her.

Their daughter did not ask for her parents to be at odds and yet she is forced to choose between them. She will always have the murder of a holy person on her conscience and the image of John's head on a platter in her memory.

Herod too cares about the respect of his guests and the love of a daughter who chose his wife over him. He cares about John and is forced into a situation in which he has to kill someone he likes. In the face of this tragedy I have two questions. First, what is the difference between Herod's way of sending and that of Jesus? And second, what does it feel like to be sent by God?

The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) believed that the holiest thing that you will ever encounter is also one of the most common. It is another person's face. Behind the face lies a mystery that we can never completely understand but which is at the same time so close to us. This is what it means to be made in the image of God. We have the chance to recognize God every time we encounter another person.

And so Levinas translates the word "philosophy" not as love of wisdom, but as the wisdom of love. He writes about "the primordial phenomenon of gentleness."<sup>6</sup> He describes ethics as "first philosophy." He asserts that love comes before every instance of knowing.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between the mission of Herod and that of Jesus is the difference between the impossible task of satisfying our ego and actively seeking the divine mystery in another person. It is the difference between going into the world to control other people (perhaps even ultimately imprisoning and beheading them) versus being sent to cast out demons and heal our universal sickness.

What does this feel like? The children's television show creator and Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers often sounds a lot like Levinas. He says, "Love is at the root of everything, all learning, all relationships. Love or the lack of it."<sup>8</sup> Last week my wife and I saw the Mister Rogers documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* It may have a lot to do with the important role the show had in my life, but I have never seen a film before that touched me in quite this way.

It brought about a collision between my childhood and adult selves. It made me understand both how little I knew then, and yet how much I understood. I watched a lot of Mister Rogers as a child but experienced the characters in the Neighborhood of Make

Believe so much on their own terms that it didn't occur to me that Mister Rogers was the main puppeteer.

Mister Rogers felt appalled by children's television with its cheap violence, clowning and the humiliation of throwing pies in people's faces. He felt acutely conscious of the vulnerability of children, that their feelings are just as real and intense as ours are. So he dedicated his life to creating a world where children really are treated with respect and cared for, where their fears and concerns are taken seriously.

During the show's first week on air in 1968 Daniel Tiger asks, "What is assassination?" On the show Rogers talked about war, death, divorce, the painfulness of change. During a time when whites refused to even integrate swimming pools Rogers famously invited Officer François Clemmons, an African American, to share his footbath. At some point in the series someone called the producers of the show to say that Clemmons was visiting a local gay bar. Mister Rogers told him not to go back there.

Still, in an interview you can see how just much Clemmons respected and loved Fred Rogers. He recalls a time when Mister Rogers said, "You are special and I love you just the way you are." Clemmons joked, "Are you talking to me?" And Mister Rogers said, "I have been for two years, but you are only just now hearing me." Clemmons went on choking back tears to say that neither his stepfather nor his birth father, no one, had told him that they loved him like that.

In the 1990's commentators on Fox News asserted that not everyone was special and that Mister Rogers encouraged the sense of entitlement which epitomized exactly what was wrong with America. But in his testimony to Congress twenty years before then Mister Rogers spoke the truth. "You don't have to do something really outstanding in order to be loved, or to love."<sup>9</sup>

I talked about playing in my wheelbarrow boat on a grassy sea and about this cathedral as a great harbor of peace and hope. Soon God will feed us a holy meal. And then God will send us back out into the storms of our daily life.

We thought we knew what to expect but in the face of the human predicament we too need to decide on our basic first principles. We have to choose between the path of trying to satisfy the relentless demands of our hungry egos, or the humble way of Jesus, between the fruitless effort to force people to respect us, and the challenge to love others more deeply just the way they are.

Every face presents us with a holy mystery that is so near and yet utterly unfathomable. In this scary world every child gives us another chance to share respect, comfort and wisdom. Brothers and sisters you are special. You are loved. May God bless you - sweet apostles of grace.

#EmmanuelLevinas, #MisterRogers, #Herod

<sup>1</sup> In a phone conversation this week Cynthia Kittridge the President of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas pointed out that this Gospel does not appear in the old prayerbook lectionary but was introduced with the Revised Common Lectionary. Noël Coward said somewhere that work is more fun than fun. I guess that's true for me too.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.outsideonline.com/2326556/trumps-pardon-hammond-bundy-family?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=WYM-07132018&utm\\_content=WYM-07132018+CID\\_84e8f04b8cd3fdac78c49c88f0a820fc&utm\\_source=campaignmonitor%20outsidemagazine&utm\\_term=pardoning%20the%20Hammonds](https://www.outsideonline.com/2326556/trumps-pardon-hammond-bundy-family?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=WYM-07132018&utm_content=WYM-07132018+CID_84e8f04b8cd3fdac78c49c88f0a820fc&utm_source=campaignmonitor%20outsidemagazine&utm_term=pardoning%20the%20Hammonds)

<sup>3</sup> The word *aporew* in Greek is a conjunction of *apo* and *poreuomai*. Bluntly it means "can't go." In the world of thought Herod cannot go with John but he delights in hearing him (Mk 6:20).

<sup>4</sup> Biblical scholars guess at the age of Herod's daughter. One believes she is twenty on the basis of historical evidence about when this happened in Herod's court. Mann, C.S. *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible Series* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1986) 293-298. Another believes she is twelve on the basis of the word *tō korasiō*. Liz and Matthew Boulton, "The Powers that Be: Eighth Week of Pentecost," SALT, 10 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Enexo*.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 150.

<sup>7</sup> This is why Montaigne will always be a better philosopher than Descartes and a better person too.

<sup>8</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor* Official Trailer. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhwktRDG\\_aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhwktRDG_aQ)

<sup>9</sup> This is a paraphrase of what I could remember from the film.