

**Mark 6:14-29 (NRSV)**

Herod Antipas, the King, heard of Jesus for his name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the last few weeks articles in **The Lutheran** and in **The Christian Century** were speculating whether the social networking Internet site, Facebook, was the new church.

Now, many of you have heard me talk about Facebook before. For those of you who are stuck in the previous century, Facebook is an Internet site that allows members to share photographs, notes and stories, information and perhaps most importantly, status updates about themselves. By status updates, I mean anything that you want to say about yourself or anything else in about 20 words or less. Some of these are just delightful. For example,

- The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you've got it made.
- Last night I was lying in bed, looking at the stars, amazed at how insignificant we all are - and I thought, "Hey, where the heck is my ceiling?"
- If we're not supposed to eat animals, why are they made of meat?
- Today is the tomorrow I worried about yesterday.

So as a source of harmless amusement, Facebook is good fun. You can restrict the people who see what you post only to people to whom you have given permission, you can revoke that permission or you can stop seeing people or postings that annoy you – and after you have seen the quiz results for "What kind intestinal parasite would you be?" from your 30<sup>th</sup> Facebook friend, you'll be very tempted.

And more than just a source of harmless amusement, Facebook offers ways to find community. My wife Linda's high school reunion class located her through Facebook. There are small groups for fans of dogs and bubble tea and summer and a million other things. It is

this community-forming feature of Facebook that got the religious observers so interested.

You see, people on Facebook are often sympathetic and go out of their way to show compassion. Last year, after Jo At Lee passed on, I put on my status line, “Greg is a little sad” and within an hour I got commiseration and thoughtful questions from a couple of dozen people who I hadn’t seen for months or even years. Almost anyone who spends time on Facebook can give a similar story.

And so, observers of religion wonder whether Facebook takes the place of church as a compassionate community of people who are interested in my ups and downs and my spiritual welfare, growth and change.

Now, let’s not dismiss this idea out of hand. I say this because I know that modern worship doesn’t really offer many opportunities for intimate sharing of concerns and griefs and joys. I know that people walk through the handshake lines and are sometimes barely holding it together, just trying to get outside so that they can bawl or curse or just forget the pain that worship sometimes brings to the surface. Most people, just inches below the surface, are hiding or coping with, or ignoring wounds and tragedies and concerns that afflict their souls and trouble their hearts and ruin their sleep. And many of them would love to share these concerns and seek comfort for them, but aren’t able to do that in the worship service.

And Facebook does offer ways to do this, or so it seems. Facebook provides an audience, a sympathetic congregation for our complaints and griefs, our joys and confessions. The feedback is nearly immediate, usually compassionate and sometimes insightful. It doesn’t require for me to leave my house or to look anyone in the eye or to feel their disapproval or disappointment. And I can wipe out any comments I don’t like or that cut too close or wound me further. **(Pause for emphasis).**

I will bet that if he'd known about it, John the Baptizer might have wished that he could have commented on Herod's Facebook page rather than criticizing him face-to-face since the latter cost him his head. This may sound like a bit of sophomoric humor but I am trying to make a serious point – the life of a Christian is not a virtual life, it is a real life, and the stakes of real life are higher than being flamed on Facebook. The costs of telling the truth, of speaking God's word and of inaugurating the Kingdom are real costs, and even if they don't cost you your head, the costs are still more than many of us want to bear.

When I talked with Linda about the attractions of Facebook, she looked at me like I'd grown another head. "I can't imagine saying something intimate or important on Facebook," she said. "How do you know who would read it?" How indeed? There is a point, I think, to finding your voice, in exploring what you believe. That may be one of the reasons that outlets like Facebook are so addictive. But there's also a strong temptation to say things that you probably shouldn't say on Facebook or in an email or in any of the broadcast media. These temptations are a lot like writing a sermon or a speech or presentation that you don't have to deliver in person, where you don't have to look people in the eyes and see their confusion or disappointment or pain. It's a lot like breaking up through a letter or a voicemail.

But the real difference between Facebook and a real community is not so much the lack of *accountability* in communication as the lack of *vulnerability*. Communications in Facebook are well-defended. You can delete communications you don't like, you can shield yourself from people you don't want to hear from and in any case you don't get the reactions you get in face-to-face communications. Being in a real community makes us vulnerable to disagreement, to conflict and to pain, both given and received.

And yet, it is in being vulnerable that we become truly human. We are finding, for example, that the Darwinian notions of survival

of the fittest are far more complicated than we thought. It was once thought that strong, proficient fighters were selected by evolution because they would have their pick of women or something like that. But what we're finding is that strong, proficient fighters tend to die young and provoke return raids against their families, so that they actually have fewer surviving children than more peaceful types. And we're also finding that groups that nurture their weaker members are more successful evolutionarily, that the fittest, those who survive, are those that care for and nurture their most vulnerable members.

Why is this important? Because what we are finding is that becoming and being human is a risky business, both for tribes and for individuals. Virtual life, life on Facebook or Twitter or other virtual communities can help us to experience community in some respects – we can practice compassion and empathy and concern. But real growth requires sustained real life in continuing real communities, in communities where we are vulnerable, where telling the truth has real consequences, where we experience conflict and compromise, forgiveness and reconciliation. There are ways of sharing our deep joys and concerns in the congregation, in small groups or talking with the pastor or with friends. They may mean investing some time getting to know who you feel comfortable with, but the investment is well worth the return.

But the big point is that we grow not by being strong but by being vulnerable. John the Baptizer and later Jesus himself, transformed lives not because they were strong, but because they were vulnerable, not because they were well-defended but because they were open, not because they were up there, but because they out there, where life is lived and all the really *bad* and really *good* things happen.

Amen.