

Serving up salvation—community style

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Buddy Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 12, 2009: The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 6:14-29.*

NO one ever said it would be light reading—the bible that is. Had I been the redactor of this gospel, I probably would have omitted the story of the beheading of John the Baptist no matter how interesting it may be—interesting in a sort of early “Law and Order: SVU” kind of way. Maybe the Southern Baptists of my childhood were right; perhaps dancing is the problem. Had this young woman not danced so wonderfully and most likely so provocatively Herod might not have been moved to make such an outrageous promise to her. Using that as a basis of a sermon is a stretch I suppose. Besides that, all the Baptists I knew really did dance and for that matter did drink, most of them anyway; they just didn’t speak when they encountered one another in the liquor store. Of course, truth be told, we have our own versions of such little inconsistencies.

Nonetheless, this story from Mark does have something to say to us. Herod Antipas was the Jewish tetrarch of the region, a fact about him that tells us of his ambition and his willingness to compromise at least, probably more. Interestingly, he was actually somewhat drawn to John, this wild-eyed religious fanatic, who was opposed to everything about Herod—particularly that he was divorced and now married to his brother’s former wife! The scripture said he liked to listen to John; I can’t recall another time in scripture when that phrase was used. Herod recognized that John was a righteous and holy man; and, yet, he succumbed to the guiles of his beautiful step-daughter and enthralled guests. I suppose there is a homiletic point or two there. Most of us occasionally have found ourselves on the sideline knowing what is right and yet not quite able to summon the courage to do something. One of Thomas Merton’s best books, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, speaks of the insidious power of inaction, particularly the silence of the majority in the face of injustice. Even in a very loud culture, we are often astonishingly quiet about some things.

The Old Testament doesn’t give us much more to work with today. Amos was a keeper of sycamore trees, a Palestine varietal of the fig tree, and a herdsman, probably bi-vocational out of need, not choice. Most

people only work two jobs because they need to. He was on the move; dressing the trees was seasonal work, and herding always required a good deal of wandering about in search of green pastures. Being alone for much of the time I imagine, Amos was a thinker and somewhat surprisingly for an uneducated man was willing to speak out about things he considered wrong.

This was a theocracy after all, and there was a powerful priest, Amaziah, who purported to keep the northern kingdom on the straight and narrow, reminding the people of what it meant to be righteous people. Surely God’s people understood that they were to care for one another, to provide for the poor among them, to prevent some from having too much while others had not enough. Seeing the truth clearly, Amos was certainly not shy in speaking out about it; but he never really saw himself as a prophet. Generally that is a good thing. Most people who proclaim themselves prophets are not and tend to be pretty full of themselves. Being named a prophet by others is better than assuming the title. Amos was a herdsman and a keeper of sycamore trees; he just happened to be one who could recognize and speak the truth.

Both stories clearly evoke thoughts of what it means to be one, to be a prophet. John the Baptist, in anyone’s book a bit over the top and clearly not someone with whom we’d want to spend a great deal of time, came to an unmistakably disastrous and quite predictable end. We are not so sure about what happened to Amos. We know that his was an early voice, 8th century BC, but just one in a tradition of prophetic writing and preaching. He and others after him railed against the ruling class both secular and religious, the class that seemed and seems to so quickly lose sight of the most vulnerable in society

So who is a prophet today? Church people often fancy themselves prophetic. It is dangerously easy for a preacher to do; we have a great wealth of godly admonishments from which to draw. Amos’ most famous line, “but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” has ignited many a passionate plea, some great, some self-serving. “Love your enemies” has provided justification for some pacifists, me among them, to beat up those whose

position is different from mine. There's hardly anything more deadly than an angry pacifist. "If you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me," Jesus' own words mean one thing to some and something else to others; even words from our beloved baptismal covenant, like "seeking and serving Christ in all others," have sometimes been used to accept everyone except those who are not nearly as open minded as we are.

It is a slippery slope, this prophet business. Words, even great ones, particularly great ones, are very hollow when our practice does not bear witness to them, when the way we act seems self-centered, sanctimonious, and all about us. To the surprise of hardly any, many mainline churches have lost their punch because they seem to say one thing and do another. Whatever happened in the 60's that made us talk more openly about hypocrisy continues. The sound bites about justice and mercy have a shallow ring and, though somehow distantly guilt-producing, are not substantial enough to make us turn from one way of living to another. We are like Herod in that way, sort of knowing the truth but not finding it compelling enough to affect our actions.

This week at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori in her opening address made some remarks that have a prophetic ring to me though I doubt she claims to be a prophet. I find her remarks hopeful in their honesty; others find them just one more step on our road to somewhere bad—though for the life of me I am not sure where. She took a bold stand—albeit perhaps hyperbolic in the sense that religious language often is—when she denounced as "heresy" the claim that the path to salvation is individual, the claim that salvation comes through one's own belief in and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Is it heretical? I don't know. On principle, I try to stay away from that word—something about people in glass houses throwing rocks comes to mind.

Nevertheless, braver than I, she claims that the crisis facing us in the church is "the great Western heresy—that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God. It's caricatured in some quarters," she says, "by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula

about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of all being." Then drawing upon Martin Buber's classic, *I and Thou*, she said, "I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship with others. There is no "I" without "you," and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the One who created us."

To claim that God's grace is our unique possession is to grant us more than we as created beings can authentically claim. Too often the notion of "us," which is always self-defined and changing, becomes the claim that we are right, that we have managed to conquer the correctness of belief, the propriety of worship, the highroad of moral behavior. Perhaps labeling that a "heresy" is spot on.

Amos and John the Baptist would have agreed with the Presiding Bishop, I think. You see, when it comes right down to it, neither they nor any of the prophets, Jesus included, were primarily keepers of religion. They were devout in their practice of it, cherishing its importance in their common life; but they did not preach religion: they preached repentance. They preached that God seeks from us a transformed heart, one that once was hard becoming soft, one that once was self-centered and afraid becoming wide open and generous, one that once cared only about the privileged becoming broken by the plight of the poor.

Salvation for the prophet is a changed world, the kingdom of God come near, and not some pietistic, individualist process. Our fabulous music, our beloved liturgy, and our enjoyment of one another are only meaningful when they direct us to those who are beyond us and not just like us. It was that claim that got Amos accused of conspiracy; it was that very claim that cost John the Baptist his head. We are not in because we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior; we are "in" because God loves us—all of us. Our role in salvation is about much more than that; it is about bringing the kingdom of God, about changing the world right here, right now.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

©2009 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads at Park Avenue and 51st Street, write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.