"Speaking Truth to Power"
Mark 6:14-29

Each Monday morning when I look at the lectionary texts for the coming Sunday, I try to get a feel for what contemporary message might lie in the ancient texts, what truths might transcend the chasm of time and have the power to speak to a congregation gathered for Sunday worship in the twenty-first century. On some weeks this exercise is anything but encouraging. The first reading for this Sunday, from 2 Samuel, is about King David dancing before the sacred Ark of the Covenant as it is brought to his new political home base, the city of Jerusalem. The text indicates that David was not well covered, that the linen ephod he was wearing may have had a "malfunction," as they say. From comments made later by his wife it's clear that she thought it went a little too far. Not particularly anxious to take that one on!

For the Gospel reading we've got that most edifying account of John the Baptizer being decapitated, his head brought out on display before Herod's birthday party guests like pieces of pie on a dessert tray. Just the kind of story that folks gathered for worship will be eager to hear as they prepare for summer picnics and outdoor activities. Some weeks it is a challenge! As another Presbyterian pastor, Joanna Adams says, "You can put your ear to the ground and listen as hard as you can, but you will not detect a single note of authentic joy or hope anywhere in the vicinity" of this text. [1]

Joy or hope, maybe not. But I wonder if there is something else there that might be helpful to our attempts at authentic living in our time – what we might call perhaps a sense of prophetic responsibility. For this Gospel text is about more than a grisly beheading. It is about someone having enough courage to speak the truth.

When we delve a little deeper into the story from the Gospel of Mark, we discover that the reason why John lost his head was because he had done what it has become popular to say these days in some circles, he had spoken truth to power, a phrase coined by the Quakers in the eighteenth century. He had dared to tell King Herod that he had been wrong to take his brother's wife as his own. John, as they say in the south, had gone from preachin' to meddlin'. Which brings up the question of whether John should have minded his own business.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker* some time back showed an older, obviously established and successful minister sitting behind his desk and offering advice to a young minister on the verge of launching his career. The older, established minister says: "Drawing on my not inconsiderable experience, Andrews, my advice to a young man ambitious of preferment in our profession is to steer clear of two subjects – politics and religion."[2] Well, of course, if it is funny it is the idea of a minister telling another minister to stay away from the subject of religion. But if the advice had been to steer clear of politics alone, it would not have been funny at all, but would have been regarded by many, in fact, as sound advice. The commonly accepted axiom is that religion and politics, like hot grease and water, do not mix particularly well. When it comes to the church getting entangled in partisan politics, I would have to agree. There is no place in the church for campaigning or promoting one political agenda over another. But most often when I hear people say that religion and politics don't mix, what they seem to mean is that the church should stick to "spiritual" matters, saving souls, talking about sin and salvation and such. The underlying assumption which fuels this sentiment is that religion has a very limited and defined role in our lives.

One person, James Gustafson, has described it as a "therapeutic" role. The church is viewed in contemporary society, he says, as a "therapeutic community." The language appropriate to the church, according to this view, is "the language of salvation, self-fulfillment, relief from guilt and anxiety, in short the language of what religion can do for you."

Mr. Gustafson agrees that the church is certainly a therapeutic community, but he says it is more than that, that it is also a prophetic community, that it has a responsibility to speak out on aspects of life other than spiritual.[3]

The Bible is full of stories of people who did just that. Moses stood before Pharaoh and confronted him about the subjugation of the Israelites and said, "Let my people go!" The exodus was a political event, the freeing of slaves, the liberation of an oppressed people! The prophet Elijah confronted Ahab and Jezebel not with the therapeutic language of how they could overcome guilt, but with the language of good and evil and of the abuse of power. Nathan stood before King David and confronted him with the same crime, the abuse of power, saying to him: "You are the man!" The Apostle Paul stood before Agrippa and Jesus stood before Pilate. The crucifixion itself was a political event.

This week marked a significant anniversary of our spiritual forebear, John Calvin, who would have been 500 years old on Friday, had he lived -- news that is greeted by most Presbyterians, as Joseph Small says, with a yawn. He is right when he says that "Lutherans adore Martin Luther. Methodist hearts are strangely warmed by John Wesley. Anglicans even have a sardonic fondness for Henry VIII. But Presbyterians are uncertain about John Calvin and his legacy."[4]

As uncertain as we may be about John Calvin, though, we are inheritors of his thoughts, actions and words. And he was most decidedly not one who limited the language of the church to the therapeutic. Calvin transformed the merchant trade and the economics of Geneva, Switzerland, starting industries for the unemployed, regulating commerce to protect the weak, establishing relief services for refugees and free education and city-run medical services.

Following him, John Knox took Calvin's ideas to Scotland where he had a run-in with Mary, Queen of Scots. She challenged him with these words: "What have ye to do with my marriage? Or what are ye within the commonwealth?" In other words, she was saying, "you stick to the therapeutic Gospel, mind your own business, stop meddling in mine." But John Knox spoke to her in the language of responsibility, of right and wrong.[5]

John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, was the only clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence, which was a political document. In one of his writings he asks, "Shall we establish nothing good because we know it cannot be eternal?" In other words, is the language of the church only therapeutic, only about salvation and eternal life? Or does it address all the affairs of human beings? The American Revolution was sometimes referred to as "the Presbyterian rebellion."

Presbyterians were involved not only in the revolution, but also, as we all know here, the abolitionist movement, as well as Sabbath and temperance campaigns, issues of war and the economy….[6]

And I see John the Baptizer standing there before King Herod, and saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." What courage! What meddling! I wonder if we are not all called to be meddlers.

But the person who comes to mind for me most prominently when I think about John the Baptizer standing there before Herod, is the late Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. According to one of his biographers, "Romero was a surprise in history. The poor never expected him to take their side and the elites of church and state felt betrayed….He was (before his election) predictable, an orthodox, pious bookworm who was known to criticize the progressive liberation theology clergy so aligned with the impoverished farmers seeking land reform."[7]

But within three weeks of his election he was changed forever by the ambush and murder of his first priest, Rutilio Grande, along with two of his parishioners. Grande had been defending the peasant's rights to organize farm cooperatives. He said that the dogs of the big landowners ate better food than the campesino children whose fathers worked their fields. Romero drove out of the capitol to Paisnal to view Grande's body and the old man and seven-year-old who were killed with him. There in a packed country church he encountered “the silent endurance of peasants who were facing rising terror. Their eyes asked the question only he could answer: Will you stand with us as Rutilio did?” Romero was changed that night and began to take up the cause of the poor.

But he could not stop the violence. Within the next year some 200 catechists and farmers who were in the country church that night were killed. “Over 75,000 Salvadorans would be killed, one million would flee the country, another million left homeless, constantly on the run from the army—and this in a country of only 5.5 million.” Romero could speak though, and that he did in weekly homilies broadcast throughout the country. He message to the poor was “not that atrocities would cease, but that the church of the poor, themselves, would live on.”

By 1980 he knew the authorities were watching and listening and that his life was in danger. He said, “I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people.” Archbishop Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter pleading with him to end the U.S. military aid because, he said, “it is being used to repress my people,” but his letter went unheeded.
On March 23, at the end of a homily broadcast throughout country, he spoke directly to the soldiers: “Brothers, you are from the same people; you kill your fellow peasant . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God . . .” And then his final plea: “In the name of God then, in the name of this suffering people I ask you, I beg you, I command you in the name of God: stop the repression.” The very next day he gave his last homily, saying “One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives.” Moments later as he held up the bread, celebrating mass in a small chapel in a hospital a sharpshooter killed him with a shot to the heart.

I know that that story, like the one in our Gospel reading this morning, is not high on either joy or hope. But it is high on faithfulness, courage, and prophetic responsibility, speaking truth to power. Most of us, thankfully, will never be called upon to do anything as dramatic or as dangerous as what both John the Baptizer and Oscar Romero did. But then we have a much more immediate example right here in this sanctuary where in the late 1800’s the Rev. Henry Fowler preached to people sitting in these same pews. Both he and the small congregation he served spoke out about the most appalling evil of their day, which was slavery. The only questions remaining are these: What evils and what injustices are we called to address in our day? And will we have the courage of our convictions?

[1] “A Terrible Text,” *The Christian Century*, 2003
[2] Journal for Preachers, ’94, p. 22
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *John Calvin 500*, Joseph D. Small in *Ideas*
[5] John H. Leith, Introduction to the Reformed Tradition, p. 216
[6] Reformed Faith and Politics, p. 17
[7] *Oscar Romero, Bishop of the Poor*, Renny Golden