
Souls and Roles

A sermon by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10, Year B

Today's sermon is going to be a little bit of a history lesson and I pray most of you will be awake by the end of it.

Some of you may know that previously I worked for an organization, called Fearless Dialogues. The work of Fearless Dialogues is to create unique spaces for people to have hard, heartfelt conversations.^[1] One of the exercises we used to do was called *Souls and Roles*. The purpose of this exercise was to help people know themselves to their core. When every role of your life is accomplished or gone or stripped away what is left behind at the core of your soul? I remember at the beginning people would identify themselves with different roles like mother, father, teacher, pastor, politician, banker, advisor, doctor, etc. And then we would ask them a question "what if everything related to this role is accomplished, or gone, or stripped away, what is one thing you will hold on to? One thing that is the core of your soul, core of your being." Some responded hope, some say light, Jesus, my spouse and some say child of God.

Today if I had a chance to ask John the Baptist about his roles, I believe he would say something like the Forerunner for Jesus, Baptizer, Son, Prophet. And I am sure at his core he would say he was "a truth teller," no fear nor flattery, just a truth teller.

To Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming to him for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Bear fruit worthy of repentance." And I can imagine the words must have been similar to King Herod as well, the same message of repentance, telling him and Herodias that this marriage was unlawful. Irrespective of who John was talking to, he was faithful to his being; he was truthful to his core.

This morning my question is to all of you – what roles do you have in your lives? And what remains at your core when all this is stripped away? In other words, among all the roles you have in life what is the core of your soul? Like John the Baptist it was amazing grace. For it was for John the Baptist, the truth teller. What is the core of your soul which holds you in the axil of your life? What is your centripetal force that is directing you to your center around which your soul and all of your roles revolve. Are you truthful to your core?

There are some gospel stories which are difficult to read, and today's gospel is one of those. When I was thinking and praying with this text, I was wondering what good news can come from murdering a prophet, a person born to his parents at a very late age to prepare the way for his cousin and the Messiah Jesus. Well, John was well prepared to make ways for the Messiah and did not hold himself back to speak the truth and truth alone. In John the Baptist we see the faithfulness, the faithful resistance and courageous hope. John the Baptist teaches us not only his humility but his loyalty and faithfulness to the way of the Cross. He prepared the way for Jesus.

On the other hand, we see a man who is a true depiction of noxious person, who thinks of himself as the center of the universe, who also had many roles in his life, but at his core was his pride and ego. King Herod was a selfish and self-centered man even though he had deep admiration for John. He was a weak and conflicted man who trapped himself in a foolish oath and his pride overtook himself. I do not want you to confuse this Herod with the one who was in power at the birth of Jesus, who ordered killing of thousands of innocents. That was Herod the Great, a Jewish who was ruling over Israel on behalf of Rome. After the death of Herod the Great, his territory was divided up amongst some of his children. And his son Herod Antipas became the ruler of Galilee. His power was close to absolute. As long as he protected Roman interests and did not overly

provoke his subjects, he could treat a low-status prisoner like John however he chose to. Then we have a character of Herodias who was married to Phillip, a stepbrother of Herod Antipas and this marriage produced Salome the dancer at this party performing for her stepfather, Herod Antipas.

The relationship and romance between Herod and Herodias started while they both were still married to their respective spouses and that was a violation of Jewish marriage law. John denounced Herod Antipas, probably publicly, most likely on the basis of Levitical laws (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21). Herodias left Phillip to marry his stepbrother Herod Antipas, and this is the Herod from our Gospel reading this morning. Herod was not only killer but also betrayer of his own people, a Jewish king working for the Roman Empire. So, John the Baptist was probably not only condemning his unlawful marriage but also his political stance which was against his own brothers and sisters.

Herod Antipas knew John was a righteous man, he was amazed by him, listened to him, and protected him as per the gospel. And yet, when the time came, John became the victim of Herod's pride and ego. His refusal to risk embarrassment "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests" cost John the Baptist his life. Truth telling cost John even his life. Because that was the message he preached from the beginning – the message of repentance and truth telling. Prepared the way for the messiah. John was born to proclaim the gospel and tell the truth to point towards Jesus! And all his ministry it was not about him, everything he was doing he was pointing to Jesus. Rather than changing his message to accommodate the king, John was willing to go to prison and ultimately die for speaking the truth! No Fear nor flattery! Rather humility and truth.

The murder of John the Baptist is a strange mystery. It led us not to a killer but to a savior. This is fitting because John the Baptist's entire life was directed away from himself and towards Jesus the Messiah. Not to being boastful of himself but humbling himself in humility and truth. Both his life and his death serve as clues in the Bible, pointing to the identity of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. John fulfilled the mission, the mission which started at his birth to be the forerunner of Jesus even in his death. St. John Chrysostom said, "Herod cut off John's head, but he could not cut off John's voice."

John the Baptist not only in metaphorical but in literal way prepared the way for Jesus. He was truthful to his core in his life and in his death. He was truth to his core preparing the way for Jesus!

Beloved, my prayer is that may our centripetal force direct us to our core which is Jesus alone through amazing grace. In our worship, in our communal life, in our celebrations, feasts and in our fellowship, may truthfulness be our core amongst all of the roles we have in our lives. Whatever we do, may truthfulness to the message of Jesus alone be our core.

Friends, I want to leave you with this question again – what roles do you have in your lives, and what remains at your core when all else is gone? Are you truthful to the core of your Soul? Amen!

[1] <https://www.fearlessdialogues.com/>