
The Cost of Life

Mark 6:14-29

A Duke Chapel sermon preached on July 12, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

It costs something to live. This is less about economics and expensive hospital bills or prescription drug costs or prices for food or clothing. This is more about the value of life itself. Your life. Human life. Human life is not cheap though this may be hard to recognize in light of our passage and recent events in our nation and world. Mark tells us, “The name of Jesus had become well-known.” Lives were being touched through his teaching, curing the sick, and feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. But just because the name of Jesus is well known doesn’t mean everything is right with the world. It was not right then and it is not right now. People can know his name but not know him. Observing the ministry of Jesus we see that to him, the life of others matters. We might tweet #LifeMatters. Jesus heals people. He feeds people. He shares unbelievable wisdom with others. People don’t have to agree with everything he says or does, but Jesus still acknowledges their humanity, affirms their human dignity and attends to their human need because his love knows no bounds. As songwriter Dottie Rambo says, “he looked beyond my faults and saw my need.” We may say with our words, “love knows no bounds” but our lives may show otherwise at times. This is why people say they’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day. Jesus, however, was different. His deeds confirmed his creeds. He really meant it when he talked about coming to serve and not being served. He showed that every human life has value. It costs something to live.

The name of Jesus was well known so what a shock to read immediately after about the beheading of John the Baptist in a long juxtaposed story. If you know anything about the gospel writer Mark it is that he focuses a lot on suffering and death. Mark appears to be a glutton for pain and he reveals that for some life is cheap. It means nothing. It costs nothing. This is the Herodias syndrome. John told Herod that it was against the law to marry his brother’s wife, Herodias. Sounds reasonable and ethical. But Herodias wasn’t happy about this and wanted to kill him but she couldn’t because Herod respected John so they just threw him into prison (that’s what you do with people you don’t want to deal with—lock them up in a cage like a wild animal). Herodias never forgot how John tried to interrupt her unlawful relationship and she never let go of her grudge. She soon found an outlet for her sin-sick soul.

Herodias and Herod’s daughter, named Herodias (very creative name selection!), pleases Herod and his party guests so much with her dancing that Herod swears to her, “whatever you ask I will give to you...” The daughter could have answered herself but chooses to go to her mother to ask what she should ask for. And her mom, still seething with hate, answers, “John the Baptist’s head.” She could have asked for half of Herod’s kingdom or at least season tickets to Duke Men’s basketball games. His head? Here we see human life bartered to save royal face. Herod trades the “head” (symbolizing his honor) of the prophet to save his own integrity since he made an oath to his daughter. His reputation was more important than the life of John. His head was placed on a platter to show that they were feeding on violence. Violence was their nourishment as it is for so many in our world.

Life can be so cheap to some, the grudges and the hate so fervent, that taking a human life by a knife at a royal party in the ancient world, or by a gun at 4th of July festivities in Chicago or a church bible study in Charleston, SC, means nothing. When life is cheap, a human being made in the image of God is viewed as a non-being thus we can do anything we want to do with them because we don’t believe in a common humanity. We don’t believe that from the beginning in Genesis we were made for togetherness, that a person is a person through other persons. When we don’t believe this, we can drug others in order to get what we want from them. We can call people names without even knowing them and do it in the name of Jesus. We can make unfounded charges to destroy someone’s family or career because human life is considered cheap as long as we can get from Herod what we wish and then we’ll be satisfied. We can put John in prison unjustly and then kill him to maintain control, power, the status quo, and to silence the

prophets. His life was cheap. The name of Jesus may be well known in this land but so is the cheapening of human life on so many levels. For some, human life is worth nothing.

For others, life will cost you some grief and pain. You care so much about human lives that you will hurt sometimes. There will be struggles. Jesus said, “in this world you will have trouble”(John 16). “Nobody knows the trouble I see.” Mark focuses so much on suffering and squabbles that to focus on John the Baptist’s death is not unusual for him nor should it be for us. The day you are born is the day you begin to die. You can’t avoid the valley of heartache in life—just turn on the news. You may not see heads on platters but we surely see bodies on streets and hear about humans suffering from gun violence. We shouldn’t be surprised by lamenting Rachels in our society, who say, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?”(Gen 25). The grief can be too much.

And when Herod hears the wish from his daughter, Herodias, that she received from her mother, Herodias, he’s deeply grieved in the same way Jesus is deeply grieved in the garden of Gethsemane. We don’t exactly know why Herod grieved. Maybe it was grief over the perpetuation of violence or grief over the cheapening of human life evidenced by the death of someone he respected. The cost of life is some grief—over lost relationships or lost loved ones. If someone is worth loving, they’re worth grieving for. We grieve for the Johns, the prophets of the world. We grieve like Shakespeare’s Hamlet after the murder of his father,

*O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!*

In Mark, we hear more about the suffering and death of Jesus than his resurrection because grief is so real and consumes human life on earth. If it hasn’t already, grief will get you.

I have a colleague in the religious academy that writes openly about her struggles with depression. Recently, she wrote on a blog, “I didn’t know it was depression until I couldn’t feel happy. That is, I had really good news and nothing about it felt good. I know, intellectually, that it is good, but I don’t feel happy.” Quaker educator Parker Palmer endured depression as well; he called it “the snake pit of the soul.” He said, “Hour by hour, day by day, I wrestled with the desire to die, sometimes so feeble in my resistance that I ‘practiced’ ways of doing myself in. I could feel nothing except the burden of my own life and the exhaustion, the apparent futility, of trying to sustain it.” Many are climbing up the rough side of the mountain. Herod was deeply grieved but that is a cost of living and loving. You will grieve over life lost because life has value. Living is not for the fainthearted. It takes courage and strength to live because of what we endure in life, what you have endured in your life. I’m pretty sure you’ve known your share of grief because you’re human and life is not cheap to you because you know its costs. Some may cheapen it. But not God.

God found so much value in us that God so loved the world. God so loved you and every other human being that he gave his only begotten Son. The cost of life, even eternal life, is someone’s life, namely Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Even though the name of Jesus was well known that did not save his life. His popularity did not create a platform of privilege through which he could avoid pain and ultimately death. In fact, we hear in Philippians to the tune of the Christ hymn, “...Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” The cost of life is life and death. The demise of John is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death at the hands of political powers as well. We have to face what our lives cost Jesus, especially when the expression of Herod’s grief is the same as Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. We are brought to his agony, tragedy, and glory at the same time. Even if we wanted to, we can’t ignore the cross of Jesus. Today’s story takes us there and confirms that the cost of life is the death of life.

That’s the gospel! We see it with John and ultimately with Jesus, teaching us, “agents of God who challenge those in power usually suffer significant consequences”(Emerson Powery). It costs something to live for God. It costs life to save lives. Military men and women know this so well. Jesus knows this so well.

*He paid a debt He did not owe;
I owed a debt I could not pay;
I needed someone to wash my sins away.
And, now, I sing a brand new song, "Amazing Grace."
Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay.*

We can never pay the debt but discipleship will cost you something. It will cost you your life for your life in Christ is not your own. A new disciple once said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' And Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 9:61-62). "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). And right before our story for today, "[Jesus] ordered [his disciples] to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics" (Mark 6).

You have to empty yourself, just like Jesus did. It costs something to live. It costs you your life for later in Mark, Jesus declares, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:35). You live to die and die to live. There's no way around it when you follow a crucified and risen Savior. No plastic surgical cure or herbal remedy to help. Only a death of self in which you find your true self.

This is where those who promote violence and the robbing of human life in any form get it wrong. You don't gain life by taking life. You gain life by giving your life. The measure of your spirituality is not how you are in church but how you are in the whole of life and to live in the world as a person who is for others.

One day a young woman was walking home from work when she saw a little girl standing on the street corner, begging. The little girl's clothes were tattered and torn and dirty, her hair disheveled and unclean, and her cheeks red from the heat of North Carolina.

The young woman dropped a few coins in the begging bowl, gave the girl a smile and walked on. As she walked she started to feel guilty. How could she go home to her cool air-conditioned house with its full pantry and well-supplied wardrobe while this little girl burned in the heat on the street.

The young woman also began to feel angry with herself and angry with God. She let her feeling be known in a prayer of protest. "God, how can you let these sort of things happen? Why don't you do something to help this girl?"

And then, to her surprise God answered, "I did do something. I created you."

It is Wimbledon weekend so I close with the words of tennis great Arthur Ashe: "From what we get, we can make a living; what we give, however, makes a life." Give your life to Jesus and you will gain your life. It's worth the cost.