

“Promises, Promises”

from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

8th Sunday after Pentecost/July 15, 2018

Mark 6:14-29

Matt Matthews

This is the last Sunday—I think—that I will begin my sermon with a Simon and Garfunkel lyric.

*I am just a poor boy
Though my story's seldom told
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocket full of mumbles, such are promises
All lies and jests
Still a man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest
mmm mmm mmm . . .*

This line interests me. Always has. *I have squandered my resistance/ For a pocket full of mumbles, such are promises.*

Is that what promises are? A pocket full of mumbles? Are promises insubstantial, ephemeral, passing, inconsequential? *A pocket full of mumbles?*

John Buchanan was publisher of the Christian Century magazine where he wrote a short column each month. In the days when we were debating gay marriage, he pointed out the big headlines of that month (January 27, 2004) when Britney Spears had her 48-hour marriage annulled after a weekend folic in Las Vegas with a boyfriend. Her partner at the moment, Jason Alexander, said they had wanted to “do something crazy” and getting married “just for the heck of it” fit the bill. They got married. This sort of bad heterosexual promising-making did more to weaken the institution of marriage than monogamous, homosexual marriage ever could, Buchanan asserted.¹

Promises are serious. Promises are solid, heavy things. We don't carry promises in our pocket or on our person. Promises carry us.

In Mark's gospel today we find Herod blustering around. He makes a promise to his daughter Herodius. I'll give you anything you wish, even half of my whole kingdom. She consults with her mom, who hated John the Baptist. Herodius came and looked to Herod. *You have promised me practically anything. You've made a solemn vow. What do I want? I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter.*

Herod made a bad promise. The most terrible part of this promise is that he kept it.

Hold that thought.

Rachel and I like to go on bike rides in these kindly summer evenings. I'm learning again to ride my bike without holding on to the handlebars. When you ride without hands it's ever so easy to get off course. You weave all over the road—at least I do—from ditch to ditch. Parked cars and people walking dogs beware. When you're riding a bike without hands you have to make constant adjustments.

¹ *From the Editor's Desk: Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully at the Dawn of a New Christian Century.* John M. Buchanan. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville: 2016.

Making adjustments is necessary in life. Sometimes we bite off more than we can chew. Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation we did not predict or plan for. Sometimes we get in over our head.

Like Herod.

He made a simple promise to his daughter. And she asked for something impossible. He should have told his daughter that he'd made a mistake. He should have told his daughter, "No way am I going to chop somebody's head off for you. My promise was thoughtless. Reckless."

He needed to make an adjustment.

Human promises, when compared to God's promises, are frail. That why we pray so earnestly when we make them. And sometimes we must make an adjustment.

Churches have dreams and make implicit promises to go a certain way, to blaze a certain path. But things change. Faithfulness requires that adjustments be made. Dreams are rediscussed and redefined.²

Herod made a promise he should never, never, never, never have made. We are reminded, here, to be careful about making promises. Promises are not light, throwaway things. We don't make a promise just "for the heck of it."

But sometimes we do make a promise that turns out to be untenable, ill-advised, and/or wrong—as Herod did—that it is a promise we should never have made and is a promise we should not keep.

Where does this leave us?

This text reminds us that we must make promises carefully, prayerfully, thoughtfully with God's help. And when we make a promise that for whatever reason veers badly off course and is leading to somebody's head on a platter, we must have the courage to make an adjustment.

Human promises are sometimes wrong. And good human promises sometimes fail.

Here in the middle of the sixth chapter of Mark, this strange story about Herod's crazy promise and John the Baptist's poor, severed head serves as dramatic foreshadowing. John stood up to the powers that be and his life was taken because of it. Jesus would stand up as his cousin John did and the powers that be would try to take his life, but Jesus would give it instead.

Jesus life, death, and resurrection remind us that God's love is dependable, true, and trustworthy. God's promises are solid. God's love has power beyond the grave. It is before his death that Jesus would tell his friends, "I will not leave you orphaned" (John 14). It is after his resurrection that Jesus promised his friends, "I am with you always. Even to the close of the age" (Matthew 28).

A pocket full of inconsequential mumbles? No. Blood. Sweat. Tears. Agony. Love. Death. Love. Resurrection. Love.

God's promises are serious, solid thing. We don't carry God's promises in our pocket or on our person. God's promises carry us.

² As a parent, I've made promises to my boys that I couldn't humanly keep. I've made promises that I should *never have made in the first place*. My boys have taught me over the years to be a better, more careful promise-maker and a more faithful promise-keeper.

God in Christ by the Holy Spirit wants us to love one another no matter what. And, no matter what, God loves us. It's a promise.

And that's a promise we can stake our lives on.

Alleluia.

AMEN.

Mark 6:14-29 ¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' 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." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."
¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for 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. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When 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." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." ²⁵Immediately 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." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.