

Radicals Preparing the Way!

It's a wonderful summer day and I know that we could be lounging on our various patios and back yards, enjoying a leisurely breakfast, listening to the birds sing, tending to our gardens or catching up with friends. I would rather head to Belle Isle for the beach instead of thinking about the fate of a radical like John the Baptist. Summertime and the living is easy. Fish are jumping and the cotton is high!

My first thought when I saw this scripture assigned by the lectionary this morning, was to have a good old fashioned hymn sing and ignore the scripture for this Sunday. But the image of John's piercing eyes staring up from my imagined silver platter made a hymn sing sound trite.

So I looked back to see what I had preached about this in the past but it turns out that I am usually on vacation or I was at annual conference when this scripture came up before.

So I looked at the other scripture assignments for this morning. I looked at 2 Samuel 6 where David danced before God. I looked at Psalm 24, about God being strong and powerful in battle, and I looked at Ephesians 1, about how we are adopted children of God through Jesus Christ.

But John's eyes wouldn't stop looking up at me from the banquet table, taunting me to prepare the way for our God. I tried to avoid his gaze, promising to talk about him when Advent rolls around and the lectionary goes on for 3 Sundays about John the Baptist, but John's severed head sent my mind to the Garden of Gethsemane and I ran into that Jesus guy, down on his knees begging God to spare him, to take this cup from him and I couldn't help hearing John in the background yelling, "You brood of vipers" as we tried to enjoy this beautiful morning.

So here we are, siblings in Christ, gathered together around the table with the vision of a main course served up on a silver platter, encouraged by the traditions of the church to partake of the radical fare that lies staring up at us. Prepare the way for our God.

Now we could prepare the way simply by looking at our scripture. I could lead us through the historical details of John the Baptist's life and we could speculate on the role he played in the early history of the followers of Jesus. We could look at all the ways in which the ministry of John differed from the ministry of Jesus. We could speculate on how the followers of John and the followers of Jesus competed with one

another and the ways in which the various gospel writers tried to make it clear that Jesus was far more important than John.

I could encourage you to be prepared to emulate the radical ways in which both John and Jesus challenged their contemporaries to repent, to change their ways, I could encourage you all to be the kind of radicals that both John and Jesus were by listing a whole host of injustices that need righting and calling upon each and every one of us to get out there and stand up for justice.

But that severed head would still be lying there on the table staring up at us and proclaiming the reality that radicals are not welcome at banquets, or sunny, summer mornings, because radicals get themselves into all sorts of trouble.

Just look at where it got John. Sure if we've dressed it up and now there's a silver platter, to serve him up on, but it is still a severed head and that Jesus guy, he was every bit as radical as John and look where it got Jesus – executed on a cross or having one's head cut off aren't prospects I want to think about on this beautiful morning. Please don't ask me to be a radical.

Oh sure, I can talk a good line, but when push comes to shove, I'd much rather play with my dog or fire up the grill. Sunday after all is a day of rest, so please don't put any ugly images in to my head. I don't want to know about all the injustices in the world. I don't want to hear the cries of the lost and forsaken. I don't want to think about the dangers out there.

I don't want to worry about the environment or the poor. As for the violence and the wars, please just give me a break. I've had enough. I've heard enough. Even if I did muster up the will to listen for a few minutes, what can I actually do about any of it? I mean, are we really expected to be like John? We're not Jesus after all! We're just good people, just trying to make the best of what we have. Can't we just enjoy what's in front of us?

Gary and I have been doing a lot of walking these days. And we like to walk down the Dequindre cut to the River Walk. There are always people there enjoying the fresh air. Children running around or on the carousel. Birds are singing, the sky is usually bright blue and the River is beautiful. Sometimes, when we are walking, I think of that song by Louis Armstrong, What a Wonderful World.

And sometimes I think what is this all about anyway. Why do we come here on Sunday morning? What are we doing? Why do I struggle over ancient texts of scripture? Does it really matter.

Just two weeks ago I was seeing photo after photo of all the standing water from all the rain we've had. And I began to think about the dangerously high temperatures out west, and the collapse of the high rise in Florida and so many people still missing. And then my mind takes me to all sorts of places where all sorts of severed heads lay scattered about. I can see poverty, disease, drought, violence, war, unkindness, sadness, hopelessness, and I wondered why I bothered to trouble myself and all of you with the words in some ancient texts.

And then I have these zoom meetings with developers and architects and I think about what it means to the community downtown, for those who are experiencing homelessness and need supportive housing, I think about all those non-profits scattered around the city, that can be housed here on site to assist people. I think about all the new programming we, as the church, will be able to offer. and I think about what the future holds for Central!

But I also hear the words of John, prepare the way for our God. As I think about this new development and the earth groaning to give birth to something new, I can't help but wonder about that newness and what it might become. Prepare the way for our God means more than just following a couple of radicals to their death. It means dying and rising again and again and again.

Death and resurrection. Dying to an old way of being, and being raised, reborn, into a new way of being. Following Jesus means not only following him to Jerusalem to confront the authorities. It means following him on the way to death and resurrection as the pathway of personal transformation. Christ crucified is about more than simply opposing the way things are in radical ways, it is about personal transformation; about being born again and again into new ways of being in the world, new ways that open us up to new possibilities, ways that include justice and peace for us, but also justice and peace for those we love and for those we have judged to be our enemies as well as justice and peace for the earth itself.

Following the way is about living with visions, visions of the future that require us to die to old ways of being in the world so that we can be reborn to new ways of being in the world.

“After John’s arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at Hand! Change your hearts and minds, and believe this Good News!”

The reign of God is at hand; these hands, your hands and my hands, these are the hands that will usher in God’s reign of justice and peace, so that everyone can life fully, love abundantly and be all that they are created to be.

The pleasures that we will all enjoy on this beautiful summer morning will feed our visions of the reign of God that in turn will strengthen us to prepare the way, the way for a new way of being in the world; a way of being that requires radical social change if we are to clear a path for justice so that peace can grow.

Yes, our visions are idealistic, some of our visions look impossible from where we are standing right now, and the holy way to prepare the way is with changes so radical that they scare us, being in the world that challenge the powers that be; anti-imperial visions of what the world could become if love is allowed to thrive.

What better way than a beautiful summer Sunday to dream of such things?

We come from a long line of radicals whose visions of the future have changed the world in so many ways. We stand upon the shoulders of all those radicals who used their hands to work for justice and peace in the world. These radicals used their hands to prepare the way so that the reign of God could burst forth in the world and open others to new ways of being in the world; ways that provided fertile ground for love to grow.

These radicals dreamed dreams that seemed impossible from where they stood. Dreams that we have seen come to fruition. We gather together to dream, to dream of what seems to all the world to be the impossible. Together we dream dreams and share visions of a world where love inspires justice and justice creates peace. The reign of God is at hand; our hands. So, let us take our rest on this Sabbath day. Let us sing in the sunshine, because we have important work to do. The reign of God is at hand; our hands. Dream dreams, prepare the way of God! Let our hands be about the work of Love in the world.” Amen