Karen Hollis – sermon

Mark 6:14-29

July 15, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

In my home as a child there was often opera playing. My parents had tall speakers in the living room that filled our rather large house with music. On any given Saturday my mother would do chores to those melodies; dad would be going around the house, fixing things and working on projects while Puccini filled the air. I always enjoyed the music, especially the harmonies and arias; it never really occurred to me to ask what they were all singing about. I’ve always approached music in that way – it’s an experience to have in the moment . . . don’t ask me *what* they’re singing. Then I moved to Canada and started listening to CBC Radio 2. While driving across Vancouver with the radio tuned to “Saturday Afternoon at the Opera,” I learned the plot that went along with the music being performed. Goodness gracious! Schemes and intrigues, huge emotional reactions, danger, suspense and more! When I was in college, a couple of my friends performed in a university opera production – they were dating at the time (now married) – he got to be the evil villain who captured his real life girlfriend and held her hostage. I don’t remember which opera it was, and I never generalized the wild drama of that story to opera as a whole, but perhaps I should have . . . stories of love, loss, power, family and more.

One Saturday, not too long ago I was listening in my car to one such story (again, I don’t remember the name – it’s just not how my brain works) . . . the old man was caring for the young boy, perhaps mentoring him in a trade. Some town’s people, on woman in particular were suspect of the man and afraid for the boy’s safety. The people ran to the workshop but what? Did the man already take the boy down the cliff? And off the people go, following them down the cliff to save the boy . . . if it’s not too late. Just from that little bit of information, our human minds start filling in the information, providing the details, but I wonder how God sees this story . . . how does God see the boy? The woman and the town’s people? When God looks on the old man, what does God see, supposing he really does mean to harm the boy? Does God see evil? That doesn’t sound like the God I know . . . we know that in our estrangement from God, we are still offered mercy. Why doesn’t God shut us out? The answer to this question is deep and wide and old as the hills; this morning let’s look at one piece of it. What if in the old man God sees not the wicked, but brokenness, pain and agony, grief and regret? I think a lot of what Christians name as evil and darkness in the world is actually brokenness mis-labeled. Our brokenness will try to find healing in the most bizarre ways, and brokenness is often paired with unmet needs and expectations. And much of our brokenness can be traced back to our families of origin; of course, those are developmentally the most important relationships in our lives. Those who raised us literally helped us create a framework and lens through which we began to see the world. It was their job to care for us when we didn’t know how. It was their job to hug us and love us, even with the brokenness they brought to the family. God sees us . . . all inside of us . . . God sees the brokenness and the resilience. God loves us, even when our brokenness leads to tragedy.

Some in the congregation will have seen the opera Salome by Richard Strauss, which more or less tells the story of this morning’s scripture . . . some important details are changed, but so are some in the biblical story! Thanks to the text and first century historian Josephus we know King Herod, as the locals called him, was actually governor of Galilee and Perea; he was son of Herod the Great; his given name was Antipas; he married Herodias, the wife of his deceased brother Herod, yes it’s confusing; and he had a daughter named Salome who was evidently quite the dancer. Following a parent in a role where said parent was known as “the Great” couldn’t have been easy. In how many ways was he trying to live up to his father’s accomplishments and expectations? He had eyes all around him, scrutinizing his every move, comparing him to his father, remembering his father’s high standards. Even John the Baptist criticized King Herod’s choice to marry his brother’s wife against Jewish law. John criticized him so much that King Herod had John arrested, it seems, to keep him quiet and to keep him safe from Herodias . . . it really does sound like opera. By imprisoning John, King Herod also kept John close - there was something about John that captivated him. He enjoyed listening to him even though he couldn’t quite own or claim what John was preaching . . . some of it rubbed up against uncomfortable things inside of him . . . and still Herod listened.

On the night of the party God is watching, but God is not seeing what others see; beneath the opportunism of Herodias, Salome’s youthful naiveté, and Herod’s foolish, inebriated ego, they are a human family, broken and imperfect, doing their best with the inner and outer resources available to them, with relational dynamics that are, at this point, hard wired. While I do believe God gives us free will to do as we choose, our actual choices are not so much free as they are conditioned by the shape and pattern of our lives. To look at this in an oversimplified way, to make a choice in a given situation outside than the range of choices we are conditioned to make, takes a considerable amount of effort and intention. And it is the human condition to make some choices that don’t serve us or others, because of the ways in which our behaviour is motivated by our brokenness. It can be messy and tragic . . . and still God calls us children. God calls to Herod in John the Baptist – there’s something inside of him that resonates with what John is saying. That part of himself wants to move and dance with those words, become a part of the love being offered, like the figure on the cover of your bulletin . . . but something fractured or twisted in him or perhaps a whole army of things in him holds him back; there is a struggle, but brokenness wins this time . . . no new choices will be made here today.

When the disciples hear of John’s death the come and collect his body and lay it in a tomb. They weep . . . Jesus weeps . . . God weeps . . . perhaps even in the privacy of his own room the man Antipas weeps for the one he could not bring himself to save. John’s death is a tragedy.

Through the messiness and weight of expectations on King Herod’s life, still God calls, this time in Jesus . . . who is this man? A prophet of old, Elijah or is it John back from the dead? Herod doesn’t have it *all* wrong, no, it isn’t John . . . it was never about John. But John pointed to the one who is coming in the name of the Lord. He is the one with whom you’ve been resonating this whole time. Jesus is the one who brings healing and wholeness; Jesus is the one who transforms what was fractured, twisted and broken to new life. Herod doesn’t know anything about people being raised from the dead, but somehow he has ears to hear what God is doing in his midst and he’s drawn to it . . . he trembles a bit when he thinks about it. God is at work in him and God is at work in us, inviting us deeper into the healing relationship of God . . . furthermore, we live on Gabriola, the island where people come to heal. It’s good to be here . . . together. Thanks be to God.