

Our readings this week bring us face-to-face with the nature of sin and grace. Since it can be hard to appreciate the latter without confronting the consequences of the former we will begin with our gospel lesson in which we hear about Herod's murder of John the Baptist. Mark tells it as a flashback. Jesus' ministry has been proceeding; he has been healing and casting out demons, raising the dead and commissioning disciples. News of his success has reached the ears of Herod.

We all know the story. Herod has John in prison for insulting Herod's wife Herodias. Herod throws a party for a bunch of local bigwigs, hoping to impress them with his power and generosity. His niece and step-daughter does the hoochie-koochie and Herod is so puffed up that he offers whatever she wants as a gift. At her mother's instigation she asks for John's head on a platter. Herod can't back down in front of his guests so he complies and John is beheaded. End of story.

Now most of us have probably not been responsible for the beheading of one of God's prophets but with a bit of imagination and a touch of empathy we can see Herod's position between a rock and a hard place as pretty typical of the situations in which we as human beings make the wrong choice and fall into sin.

Have you ever walked away from confrontation in which it would have been the right thing to do? It could have been an off color or racist joke, or downright lying by someone you didn't wish to expose. Have you never tried to smooth over an awkward moment in which someone was mistreated but you didn't want to stick your neck out? Have you never promised more than you could deliver and then tried to renege on your promise? Have you never tried to live beyond your means, or found yourself pressured by your peers or the expectations of your boss or bosses to do something you didn't think was right?

If not then good for you! Or perhaps it was a different scenario that I neglected to mention. Of course when we are truly honest with ourselves we will admit that there have been times when we have opted for self-interest, or the interests of someone we cared about at someone else's expense. That, my friends, is the insidious and invidious nature of sin. Sin creeps up on us when we least expect it. All we have to do is look at the various corruption scandals and trials here on Long Island to realize how many of our politicians and leaders step down a slippery slope from bending the rules to really nasty and life-changing consequences. Do the names Dean Skelos, Paul Manafort, or Alain Kaloyeros ring any bells?

Ok so the lapse into sin, and lapse comes from a Latin word meaning to slip or fall is very easy. And the interesting thing is that it usually comes down to a choice that marks the final plunge. Today, for Herod, it was when he acceded to step-daughter's bloodthirsty request and gave orders to the guards to bring back John's head. Herod did this even though the request grieved him deeply; he did this because he needed to save face in front of his guests. Prior to this Herod had kept John around even though his wife Herodias hated John. Herod feared John, knowing that he was a holy man and he liked to listen to him. Nevertheless Herod made his choice for evil. At the same time that choice was influenced by all of Herod's previous behavior which was all about his own selfish wants and desires whether protecting his power by collaborating with the authorities, or marrying his brother's wife while his brother was still alive in violation of Jewish law, or having his step-daughter dance provocatively before his guests

and then being titillated enough to offer her whatever she wanted, even to the half of his kingdom.

Ugh. Nasty man. Bad behavior. Evil choice.

As I said most of us have never been responsible for beheading o of God's prophets but most of us have our own memories of nasty, dishonorable things that we have done.

Now that we are all squirming, where's the good news?

For today's good news we turn to our wonderful reading from Ephesians.

There's a lot going on in this passage, which, together with some high-falutin language can make it easy to gloss over but it is a powerful testament to the gift of grace that is the basis for our life in Christ.

God has chosen us to accept Christ's offer of new life in him and in that we are spiritually blessed. Even more important, through Jesus Christ we are made holy and blameless before God.

Holy and blameless? When we look back at our live do we see ourselves as Holy and Blameless? Well probably not so much but in the forgiveness provided by Christ's atoning sacrifice we have the chance to be made new again, that phrase "redemption through his blood and forgiveness of our trespasses" makes it very clear.

Each and every week we make our public confession and if we are spending any time at all with God in prayer whether through the daily Office, or Forward Day by Day we are asking forgiveness even more frequently. Sometimes it is hard to believe we are forgiven, I know for myself the tendency to hold onto mistakes. To mortify myself with old sins and screw-ups is very strong or to think that God is punishing us for our misdeeds. This passage is an invitation to see ourselves through the God's eyes, to accept God's gift of forgiveness, to accept that we have been made new again, to try again.

Sometimes I think that our worst sin is to let go of our woundedness in order to accept the healing, the grace that God has lavished upon us. Unless we are socio-paths, most of us do a pretty good job of self-flagellation when we have sinned – even though it might not seem apparent to others. If that sin comes out of our feeling in inferior, or powerless, nothing we do is going to compensate – as Herod himself would find out. His impolitic marriage with Herodias made him some enemies and eventually he would be accused of treason and exiled to Gaul where he was never heard from again.

To see only failure or shame is to reject what we have been offered in Christ. The words of our Eucharistic Prayer C resound powerfully when we pray "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only and not for strength; for pardon only and not for renewal."

We are also reminded that God's desire is to gather all things to him; for this reason Jesus Christ became incarnate in order to offer us a share in his inheritance with the Father, to be adopted as his children. We first accept God's grace or have it accepted for us in baptism where we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

That invisible seal is indissoluble. But like any of the gifts we have been given we have to claim it and to use it in order to benefit from it. God already love us as his creation and God is ready to accept us as his children through the work of his Son but we need to say yes and act as if we believe it. We need to believe that what has been offered in Jesus Christ is true and that seal in baptism becomes activated as it marks our witness to Christ in our faith, in the way we live our lives, the way we carry out our apostolate in the world. The cost of activation is faith, faith made possible through grace that we may live fully into our hope of redemption which gives us a freedom to live beyond our fears, our insecurities, and to risk our lives in the name of Christ.

It boils down to his: God gives us the grace to accept our faith, God gives us the grace to live into our faith, by God's grace we are forgiven when we screw up , and God's grace will bring us into our inheritance with him. All we have to do is keep saying yes. It's not a bad deal, is it?

Amen