

**COMPROMISE**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 7B-Mk6:14-29*  
July 12, 2015

As I've said before, Christians really do live at the intersection of two worlds. There is the visible world, in which we are citizens of the United States and participants in our culture and society, and there is the Kingdom of God, into which we are initiated by baptism.

Now the political entities to which we belong have defining documents, like the US Constitution and other laws. Culture and society's norms, by contrast, are unwritten and unspoken. By definition culture is what is assumed and taken for granted, generally invisible to its participants until it is thrown into relief by some kind of culture clash: an encounter with a denizen of another culture who doesn't take the same things for granted, or a visit to another culture, like Spain, or Thailand.

Along with the political world, whose values are defined by law, and the culture, whose values people take in unquestioning like mother's milk, we Christians also exist in the world of the Kingdom of God, whose values are presented in our Holy Scripture, and to some extent in the traditions of the church.

These three worlds are intersecting sets, but they are not coterminous. They are not exactly the same. And, generally speaking, people make concessions to one or the other. For example our citizenship sometimes takes a backseat to our culture, which tends to tolerate the breaking of selected laws, like speed limits. All of us resolve these competing claims, consciously or unconsciously, according to our own consciences. *Or* we reconcile ourselves to living in a not-always-comfortable tension between our worlds.

Now I hope this isn't news to you, but must of us, in some circumstances at least, choose not to follow what Jesus says, because Jesus' words conflict too badly with cultural norms. Let's face it, sometimes we have good reasons. For example when Jesus says, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away," we recognize that in Jesus' own cultural context, there was something called rabbinical hyperbole, in which a teaching was grossly overstated to drive home a point. So in this case, our culture, which no longer recognizes this convention, trumps the literally meaning of Jesus' words.

Things get a little murkier in other contexts. Jesus says, "Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor." Unless we are monastics, or conservative Amish, we usually reason that in this instance Jesus was talking to a particular person in a particular situation, and does not direct his remarks to us.

But what about the biblical injunction to tithe your property to the work of God, giving one tenth of your income to the church or to charity? Some Christians do that, but not very many. We may say, "Well, tithing was necessary in a time and place when there no social welfare programs, but that isn't the case now." Or in genuinely good conscience we can legitimately reason that tithing is not possible for our family at this point in time.

However, there are other biblical injunctions, frankly, that we recognize as universally valid and yet just don't do routinely, like loving our neighbors as ourselves and forgiving freely and praying for our enemies. Believe me, I'm not bringing this up to induce guilt feeling. My point is simply that we all make compromises with the stated norms of our faith, and sometimes we even know better.

Today we have a scriptural example of someone who knew better and still went badly, tragically, off track.

The story from Mark we heard this morning is a rarity in the Gospels. It's not about Jesus at all, except insofar as when Jesus hears about it he withdraws from people, apparently grieving. This story at first blush seems to be about John the Baptist, but it really is more about Herod, isn't it?

Herod is an example of a person with many advantages who makes a bollocks of his life. He is a Jew of royal lineage who has successfully outmaneuvered his older brothers in acquiring power. He is the titular king, although obviously a so-called "client king" of the Roman Empire. He is what we might call a collaborator, entirely too cozy with the oppressor of his own people.

Herod has divorced his first wife, who still lives, to marry Herodias, whose first husband was also still alive when she divorced him. Whether this second marriage was made for adulterous or political reasons is more than I know, but from the circumstances it's clear John the Baptist had plenty to criticize.

We are told that Herod arrested John because Herodias made him, but that Herod himself was attracted to the strange prophet despite John's criticism of him. We are told that Herod regretted ordering John's execution. In other words, Herod knew better. There must have been something in his early religious training that made him recognize the truth in John's ministry. Yet because of his rashly extravagant public promise, Herod goes against his better judgment, which may have been the last vestige of his religious conscience. He compromises. Fatally.

It's hard to understand the moral purpose of including this sordid story in the canon, in such lurid detail, except as a warning.

However I pass on this warning not as a condemnation, because in so doing I would condemn myself. We all make compromises. We all rationalize. And here's the tricky part: Not all rationalizations are bad. Some are necessary. Some are even legitimate. And I believe that scripture indicates they're all forgivable, in that God's grace exceeds even our human capacity to sin. That is part of what Jesus' death and resurrection mean.

But I do think this story tells us to be careful. Be aware. Don't assume that cultural mores are contiguous with Kingdom of God values, which always call us to the highest of standards. Be humble, aware of how easy it is to fall short of heaven's values. And be forgiving, for the same reason.

Ultimately, and above all, be confident in the mercy of God, which in the end is what stands between us and the compromises we inevitably make.