

Discomfort

Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

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I really just want to be comfortable. To live comfortably. To love comfortably. To sleep comfortably. I am after all the modern privileged man.

So as the years tick by and the gray hairs increase (I've got about 19 now in my beard), I find that the things that used to excite me have since diminished. Have they also you? I no longer need a spontaneous Friday evening out on the town with a large group of friends to be happy. No, just get me into my pajamas, pour me some scotch, and put on the fire pit out back and I'm content.

Just the same, I find less impulse these days to get heated over things like someone else's questionable opinion; or a politician's inexplicable defense; or my wife's perpetual tardiness for any function that necessitates our punctuality.

You see, those trifles and arguments just aren't worth it anymore. Not when they threaten to ruin another evening and risk any greater mental and emotional discomfort. There has been too much of both in my life, especially over this last half-decade. No, I believe what now suits me best in these exponentially advancing days is purely a simple, comfortable, predictable rhythm with less overall thrills and surprises.

In part I think that's what's made the past year so difficult for all of us. A complete disruption of the established rhythm. From predictable routines. And even though some sense of what was before is now creeping back in, it's also plainly different. The record is playing again, our favorite songs are back under the needle, but there's a lot of dust and a lot skipping and the speed just isn't right. Something is off, and so frustratingly, though I want to be, I'm not yet comfortable.

And so being this creature who yearns if not sloths for comfort, I really *really* wanted to avoid these uncomfortable lessons that we have been given today. I basically pleaded with Ken to use anything other than the lectionary text! But it was not to be. So here we are with the beheading of John in Mark and a redemption through blood sacrifice in Ephesians. Thanks be to God.

Addressing the latter first, I used to wonder: did he really need to shed his blood in order for our sins to be blotted out? Atonement theology, if I'm honest, made me somewhat uncomfortable. Why would a God who once forbade human sacrifice later demand it? Why not like just forgive us outright? Wouldn't God being God be capable of that? After all, as Daniel M. Bell suggests, "Christ's faithfulness even to the point of death on the cross doesn't signify a divine demand for retribution, but rather a divine refusal to hold our rebellion against us." At least that's how I see it. Now granted, there is a lot more to atonement than that, and if nothing else, we can learn from it the true power and awesomeness of sacrifice, and how we'd be better off adopting the practice more into our own unsacrificial lives; but even so, the whole redemption through blood thing often gave me pause if not the willies.

And speaking of willies... what is going on with this gospel text morning? Talk about discomfort.

Here we have a woman named Herodias who got bored of her husband Phillip, who then connived to divorce him so that she could take up with his very own brother, Herod Antipas. After Herod and Herodias marry (I know, it's all slightly confusing), our friend John the Baptist comes along and protests against their arrangement, which discomforts Herodias to such a degree that she petitions to have him killed. Antipas being somewhat like Pilate and unwilling to assume all the blame and the blood on his hands tries to wiggle out of her request. And for a moment he's successful. That is until Herodias' young daughter, Salome, seductively dances before the King and "pleases him." Gross. Armed with an effect akin to taking a purple pill, Antipas agrees to do whatever the young girl – his niece and step-daughter, mind you!! -- would ask of him. She of course repeats her mother's request, but this time ups the ante, and asks for John's head to be served on a platter as the final place setting at the royal banquet. I mean, do you see what I mean? Do you see why I wanted to avoid this lesson? It's super uncomfortable, even if it reads like a made for TV-Hollywood blockbuster with all the scheming, seduction, affairs, and blood-lust.

So what's the point in all this, I wondered? I mean, besides to skeeve me and the rest of you out? And then it hit me. That is precisely the point! To make me uncomfortable. To make you squirm a bit. Being the audience to such despicable behavior and narratives of evil should make us all flinch! We shouldn't be entertained, indifferent or desensitized to it, but we should be so bothered (like John) that we are called to respond, speak out and act against it. Even to the risk of our comfort. Even at the risk of our lives.

But I'm afraid my friends. I'm afraid. For one I think that risk and age are often antonyms; and two, we aren't bothered enough by deplorable platforms and engagements of entertainment. I mean why are folks still watching the nightly news when it's mostly who murdered who? Why are we binging late night Netflix shows whose plot features women being abused by a serial madman (think, "You")? Why are we fraternizing in company or chat rooms overrun in bigotry and racism?

Moreover and more often than I am comfortable in acknowledging, it seems that as a people we choose to play the part of Herodias when we begin to feel uncomfortable. Rather than being open to change, we instead presume to shoot the messenger. If we don't like what we hear, or don't like what we see, we either retreat back into our protective-wrapped bubbles, or with tongue and fist lash out against everything and everyone who dares us to repent and evolve.

Remember Colin Kaepernick? This dude literally took a knee (a knee!) to protest police brutality and it made people so uncomfortable that he lost his career for it. He did what millions of Catholics do every Sunday. And he did it after consulting with a white marine vet, who pointed him towards the very display. And yet he became the lightning rod for racists to publically espouse their hate and issue their death threats.

Remember Greta Thunberg? This brave young girl took it upon herself to sail around the world to national conferences to help grow public awareness to the risks posed by climate change. Instead of congratulating her immense accomplishment, or being praised for the thoroughness of her avoidance of hypocrisy (she sailed even though it would have been easier to fly, so to ensure her smallest carbon footprint), she was critiqued and mocked by older adults and elected politicians who were made uncomfortable by the power of her voice, her following, and the truth of her claims.

Remember Holden White? This gay teenage boy just wanted to go on a date. To find love. Rather than encountering either, he was instead entrapped by a spiteful, insecure, malicious young

heterosexual man who pretended to be gay before beating and brutalizing Holden within an inch of his life. Made so uncomfortable by the orientation in which God made Holden, Chance Seneca almost killed him over it.

If it makes us so uncomfortable to re-examine our history, our ideas, ourselves, such that we respond like Herodias and Salome with ridicule, vengeance, and violence, then really, just how comfortable and sure are we in our history, our ideas, ourselves?

Now from a point of debate, I imagine some Christian out there could potentially and uncomfortably try to reverse all this and say well... maybe those critics and villains were acting like John the Baptist after all, since like John, they were just attempting to rebuke what they found to be wrong and immoral in Holden and Greta and Colin. So who's to say who is Herodias and who is John?

To which I say, really? Really?

And let's not make the same mistake as Herod and completely confuse our Lord and Savior with John (as great as he was), as Herod did in those first several verses. Though cut from a similar cloth and suffering similar fates, Jesus goes beyond a call for repentance *in* the wilderness by *leaving* the wilderness to search for those in the world he could help and save. He goes to harlots, tax-collectors, outcasts, sinners, poor, rich, it doesn't matter. And about the only rebukes he gives (outside of that time with Peter) is towards those who should have known better. Those in positions of knowledge, power, and authority (like Herodias). Jesus would not sit in the stands booing a man for taking a knee, no more than he would ridicule a little girl or attack a gay boy.

John Piper reminds us that: "The first demand of Jesus' public ministry was, *Repent*. But he spoke this command indiscriminately to all who would listen. It was a call for radical inward change toward God and person. The meaning of the Greek word behind the English *repent* (*metanoeo*) points in this direction. The second part (*noeo*) refers to the mind and its thoughts and perceptions. The first part (*meta*) is a prefix that regularly means movement or change. So the basic meaning of *repent* is to experience a change of the mind's perceptions and dispositions and purposes."

And friends, we are being called to do just that. To repent. To change. And to elicit change. In others yes, but just as much if not more so in ourselves. And accomplishing both by uncomfortable acts of humility, service, and love, while also ruffling some feathers in the process by speaking truth to power and right to wrong.

Because in the end, some arguments are worth it. Because in the end, some discomfort is necessary. That is the cost of our discipleship. That is our charge. We must be willing to speak up and act, to shake the dust off our well-fitting comfortable shoes, and wear out their soles by doing so again and again and again.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his pinnacle work *Mere Christianity*: "If you're thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you: you're embarking on something which will take the whole of you."

And so here, at the end, let us ask what that whole embarkment might look like for Christians today in 2021; in Chestnut Hill? Maybe in a way it looks like sacrificing a Saturday at home for a Saturday morning at Face-to-Face or Habitat for Humanity. Maybe in a way it looks like turning off the

Phillies or Eagles on a Sunday afternoon so to serve at West Kensington Ministry in the many outreaches they have going on there. Maybe in a way it looks like attending a speaker series or book group on race relations and checking our white privilege at the door for the sake of listening, hearing and learning. Maybe in a way it looks like going to a Pride Festival, even if we are heterosexual (!) and celebrating and dialoging with the wide diversity of God's made and chosen people.

And you know what else? It also means sitting with the shy or strange person at the end of the table at the risk of whispers and laughter. It also means standing up to bullies and then befriending the bullied. It also means fighting for women's equality in the workplace, and fighting for women's equality in every place. It also means speaking out when our neighbors use the F-word to demean people attracted to the same sex. It also means correcting our co-workers who still use the R-word in belittling those who are deemed to be challenged. And it means admonishing others who still use the N-word or any other word to dehumanize our black, brown, yellow and red brothers and sisters.

Which also means you might lose some friends by doing so, making life more uncomfortable for you and me and well, all of us together.

But if we are to authentically call ourselves Christians, then we must risk to step outside our cushy lairs and sacrifice our comfort for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of him whose friend risked his own voice and lost his head. For the sake of him who risked it every day for the sake of us, and for it died on a cross redeeming us by his blood... or perhaps, more comfortably... who redeems us by his sacrificial love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.