

Herod, John the Baptist and General Convention

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Mark 6:14-29

I looked at the lectionary before I left for General Convention and thought what I will not have much time to write this sermon and what in the world am I going to do with a story everybody already knows. I was wondering what I was going to preach on. As the two weeks of General Convention progressed I realized that the dilemma facing Herod is one we face everyday. So what was going on with Herod in our passage today and how does that relate to General Convention.

First of all this is a flashback. The start of this chapter has people wondering who Jesus is, isn't he the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter. "Where does he get all of this?" they ask. The next bit is referring to Jesus sending out the 12, two by two on their mission. Herod hears of all of this and wonders. Herod had already executed John, but he is now worried and wondering about who this Jesus character is? He wonders if it is John the Baptist come back from the dead, for the message that Jesus preaches is so close to John's message.

It is critical to understand that Herod was a relatively weak king. This is a different Herod from Herod the Great who was king at the time of Jesus' birth and was visited by the Magi. That Herod wielded great power and influence. The Herods that followed were much weaker rulers. The Herod in today's passage was never actually given the title of King by the Romans and his hold on power was tenuous. Now John the Baptist had criticized Herod for taking his brother Phillip's wife as his wife. Scripture tells us that his wife hated John the Baptist because of this criticism and was looking for a way to get rid of him. It wasn't enough for her to have him imprisoned. Herod however was intrigued by this prophet and according to scripture enjoyed talking with him.

The crisis comes when Salome, (incorrectly identified as Herodias in Mark. Herodias is Herod's wife) performs what has become her famous dance and dazzles those attending the party that Herod is giving. He grants her whatever she will ask. The young girl (probably around 9) asks her mother who wants revenge on John the Baptist and asks for his head on a platter. Now Herod is stuck. If he doesn't give her the "gift" then he loses face in front of his guests and they are all very aware of how weak a leader he is. On the other hand he believes that John is a prophet and a holy person whom he wants to learn more about and feels uncomfortable executing.

So this sets up a classic ethical and moral dilemma. This is when two "goods" are in direct conflict. In the world of ethics this is when two or more things that are desirable

are in direct conflict with each other. Both needs cannot be completely fulfilled, one is going to have to give way to the other. For Herod this is the need to please his wife and not lose face in front of his guests weighed against his knowledge that John was indeed a prophet and a person from whom he wanted to learn.

Two goods in competition or conflict are what we are often faced with in our daily lives. That was certainly true as the 79th General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in Austin the past two weeks. These dilemma played out in several important discussions and resulted in resolutions to try to seek a way forward in a church with very diverse ideas and members. You do need to remember that the Episcopal Church is an international church with diocese and provinces outside of the US in particular in Central and South America. By the way the Diocese of Cuba was welcomed back into the Episcopal Church after having been removed in 1966. That was a memorable moment when their bishop and deputation were seated as full members.

There were four areas where the deputies and bishops wrestled with some very difficult ethical and moral issues for which there is no single right answer that fully pleases everyone.

Immigration and the refugee crisis was one area where there were resolutions, protests and earnest discussions. How to balance the very real humanitarian crisis that is sending immigrants and refugees from Central and South America to our southern borders and their needs with the legitimate need to have reasonable and secure borders and immigration policies. Some of you who followed along on Facebook may be aware that over 1000 deputies, that a large number of deputies went to Taylor Texas to a detention center for women who have been arrested for crossing the border illegally. This included most of our deputation.

I have spent time in Honduras and Wendy has been to El Salvador and seen first hand the violence and danger these women were fleeing. I have worked at an orphanage named El Hogar run by the Episcopal Church of Honduras. The boys in this orphanage are there because their parents have been killed by gangs or sadly and more often their mothers have been forced into prostitution by the gangs. I have listened to the gunfire that occurred every night just outside the concrete block walls of the orphanage where the gates are locked before sundown because the capital city is so dangerous.

Now it is true that the women in this detention center may have crossed the border illegally, but talking with the local people who have been working with them, they have been consistently blocked from legally entering to ask for asylum. In their desperation they chose the illegal route. So there is one problem. Complicating the situation in Taylor the prison, and that is what it is, is run by a private for profit corporation. The city leaders including the mayor want it closed down even though it is a large employer because of the poor treatment of the women that they have seen in the prison.

We learned from the local group that the women were aware of our protest and both heard and saw this group of faithful people gathered to pray for them. This action gave them comfort because they felt that nobody cared and that they had been forgotten. Both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops passed resolutions asking the congress and the President move forward with meaningful immigration reform and ask that we as members of the Episcopal Church use our individual voices as we see fit to lobby our members of congress to fix the situation that causes prisons like the one in Taylor to exist. These resolutions acknowledge the need for good humane immigration policies that reflect the dignity of every human being.

Another area where a great deal of time was spent was on the issue of Prayer Book revision. In this area the wide range of theological views was quite apparent. Many feel the need and desire to see new liturgies developed that will update language that is now 50 years old in our current liturgy. Those who spoke on the floor and in testimony range from those who would and do still use the 1928 BCP, those who see nothing wrong with the gender language of God as masculine and those who desire liturgies that take out what they view as patriarchal language where every reference to the Trinity is masculine. This is more than just political correctness, but a desire to understand God and that God is not created in our image and likeness but we are created in God's.

What came out of all this is the decision to not create an entirely new Book of Common Prayer but to develop new liturgies for trial use that allows for more expansive language and images of God. The reality is that a new BCP would not be ready to publish until 2030 and would cost an estimated \$8 million to develop. That does not include the cost to parishes to purchase new books and to be honest in 2030 will we even still be using books in our pews? The new liturgies will be made available electronically for parishes to then create service leaflets using them. Our current BCP will stay exactly as it is and we as a parish will be able to evaluate and decide if we wish to use any of the new liturgies or some combination of the current liturgies and the new ones.

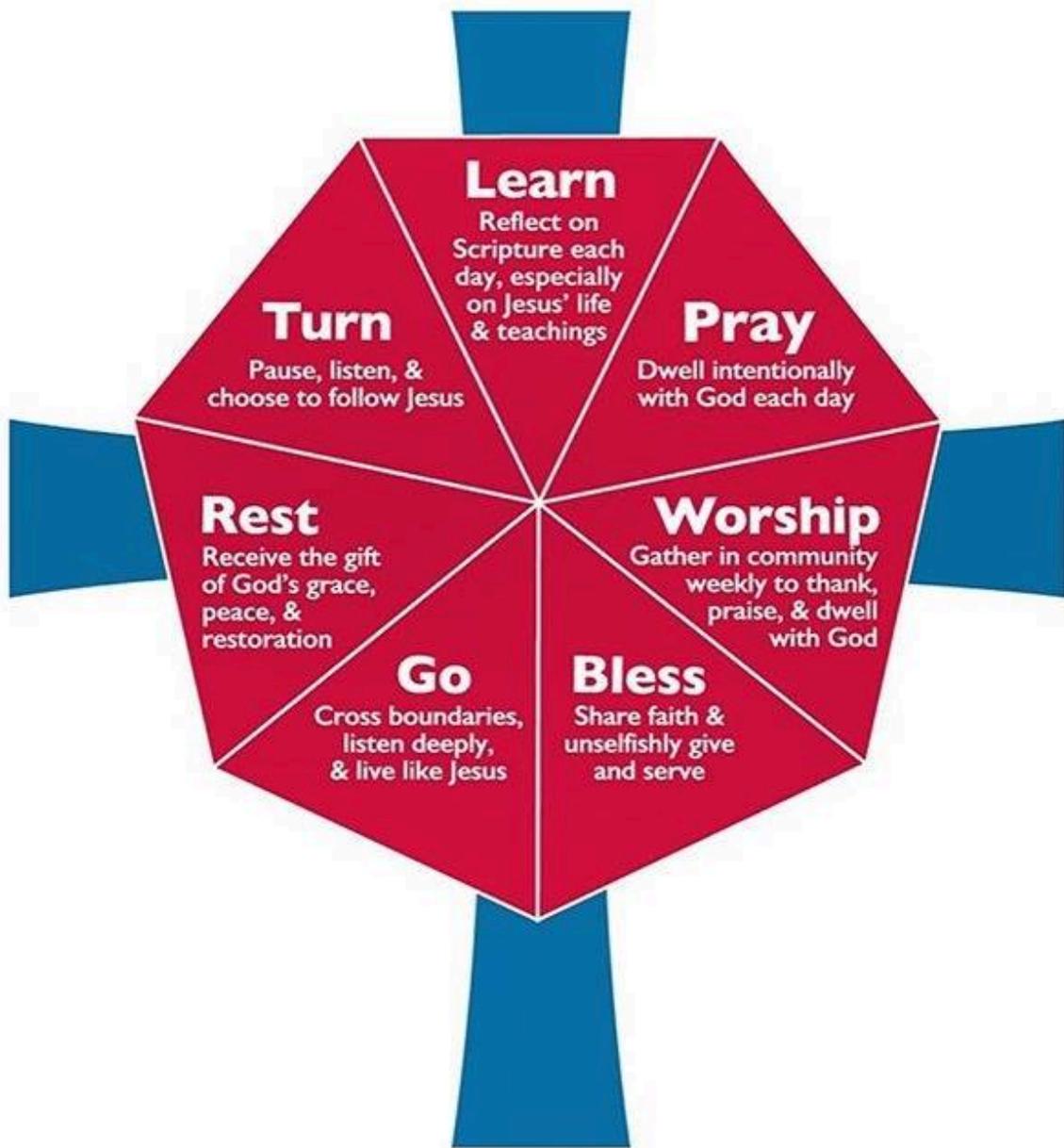
An area that this also will facilitate is in the area of same gender marriage services. The liturgy that was created three years ago has now been approved for trial use in all the dioceses. There are 8 dioceses in the United States where the bishop has not allowed same gender marriages. Congregation and priests in those dioceses may now choose to use those liturgies if they wish, no priest or congregation is forced to use them, and if oversight of a bishop is needed may ask for supervision from a bishop other than their diocesan bishop. Again we have competing goods of the desire and right of a bishop to control what goes on in their diocese with the desire and needs of individual congregations that may not agree with that bishop.

I was the aide to the committee on ethical investing. This committee worked to develop policies that guide the investment policies of the Church Pension Group and those who handle the various investment trusts like our diocesan investment fund. This committee was working on how to balance the fiduciary responsibility to attain the best investment

return with the ethics of the companies in which our money is invested. Long ago we along with most churches divested from South Africa and Desmond Tutu believes that this had a major part in bringing about the end of apartheid. How do we use the money that has been entrusted to us in ways that help rather than injure. The resolutions ranged from investments in fossil fuel companies, gun manufacturers and those whose businesses impact the situation in Palestine and Israel. In the past year pressure as stockholders from several different church investment groups was brought to bear on Dick's Sporting Goods and helped result in their decision to stop selling "assault" style weapons after the Parkland shootings. We did hear a powerful witness from some of those students. The resolutions that were passed called on the committee that oversees investment strategies to develop and adopt goals and strategies that help bring about actions from companies that are in alignment with our baptismal promises and a desire for a more just and safer world.

Time really doesn't allow me to go into more detail, but underlying all of these discussions and often impassioned debate was Bishop Curry's message that as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement we are called to be carriers of God's love to a broken world; that everything we do must be guided by love of God and love of neighbor. This is the guide, the gauge. The standard by which we need to make these difficult decisions.

I came away encouraged that we as a church are called to first and foremost make that love known in all the world. That we are called to live out that love as laid out in our baptismal promises. Yes it was messy and yes there are still divisions out there because as with Herod sometimes we deal with competing goods and no one answer completely satisfies everyone. How we walk that path must be governed first and foremost as people who proclaim a liberating, life giving and loving God. In his opening sermon Bishop Curry asked us to practice the way of love by living a Jesus Centered Life. More about that next week.



THE WAY OF LOVE
Practices for Jesus-Centered Life