

# Troublemakers

A Sermon Expositing Mark 6:14-29

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

---

The Empire knows what to do with troublemakers. By “troublemakers” of course I mean those who, in the words of the late Civil Rights Leader, John Lewis, get into all kinds of “good trouble.” John the Baptist was one of those people. His mouth planted him firmly in the middle of an absolute nest of power and privilege that serves as a pretty accurate microcosm of the way power works in the world. Herod Antipas is the holder of ultimate power in our story as he controls every aspect of life in Judea and holds the wellbeing of those who live there in his hands. Still there are other brokers for power about; his wife (or his brother’s wife) who works her agenda wielding the power that comes with relationship, her daughter who wields the power of pleasure she can give, and even a room full of partygoers who Herod wants to please thereby giving them a bit of power. Stepping into the midst of that tangled mess of agendas, motives, and tactics is not a good idea if you want to stay out of trouble, but John wasn’t the kind to stay quiet about abuses of power, exploitation, corruption, that sort of thing – he was a good troublemaker. The Empire - that tangled mess of power that is the sum of the system – the empire knows just what to do with troublemakers. You silence them by any means necessary, even if it means removing their heads in John’s case.

This should be startling news for those of us who profess to be followers of a troublemaker and who are therefore called to troublemaking of our own. The story of Herod’s treatment of John wasn’t just about one particularly crazy party. It is the story of how power works in the world even now, it is the story of empire. No, we don’t live in an empire as a matter of political organization, but we do live in a world where wealth and power (synonyms really) flow to those who have them. And that kind of world knows what to do with those who dare to challenge the status quo. That kind of world knows what to do with people who suggest that nobody should go without no matter the cost to the rest. That kind of world knows what to do with people who suggest that those outside our norms might actually be worthy and wonderful. That kind of world knows what to do with people who point out the violence that everyone else seems to be unable to see, the violence that holds the status quo in place. That kind of world knows what to do with people who live like Jesus did. You silence them in whatever way is most effective. It doesn’t have to be a beheading. You can issue threats or simply demonstrate the capacity for violence and that sometimes pulls troublemakers into line like bringing military weaponry to a peaceful protest. You can co-opt their messaging, water it down and make it palatable like the consumerization of Pride Month. And at the end of the day, sure you can just silence the troublemakers with violence. It’s a story as old as time. The empire knows what to do with troublemakers. So how, as followers of a troublemaker, are we to expect to be a part of change in the world?

Make note, friends, of the most consistently employed and effective tactic used to keep troublemakers in line. It is featured at least twice in our gospel reading this morning. Why was it, do you think, that Herodias wanted John killed? He was already in prison and therefore effectively silenced of his charges against her and the household. Perhaps it was simple retribution for the trouble he had already created? Perhaps. But it is worth noting that John’s having been killed, especially in such a graphic way, serves not only to silence John, but to

---

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

put fear in the heart of the next troublemaker. That's the most common way that unjust systems keep the status quo, by creating barriers of fear around it. It shows up in our story a second time when we realize that this whole episode is part of the story of Jesus while on his way to the cross. The Roman cross was an instrument of torture and death, yes, but it was also advertising. By raising up the gruesome specter of what happens to those who go against the empire they ensure that fewer will do so in the future. In fact, that is, I believe, a leading purpose why Mark tells us this whole story.

If we read the full context of today's lesson you'll see that the episode of John being executed is not simply a linear part of the overall story. Rather, the event of John's death is told out of chronological order in the middle of another part of the story. After Jesus had been shunned in his own home town – for making trouble – he sent his 12 disciples two by two out into the world on a mission of healing and teaching. In short order they report back on the successes of their trip, but in the middle of that story Mark inserts this otherwise out of place account of John's death. It reads as a way of saying, “but here's a detail you need at this point.” The fact that John met a gruesome death actually says something about the disciples being sent out – to make trouble. And I think that's just the thing. Adding John's death sets the context. The story of Jesus's life and ministry is unfolding in the void where John's good troublemaking had been and Jesus is training up disciples to follow in his footsteps. All three generations of this mission to resist injustice and bring wholeness to all people faced down implicit threats of social castigation or even violence, but none of the three were deterred. That, friends, is how we make change in the world – by showing up to do our part even when we are compelled not to. Think of the impact that has on the empire, the system, the status quo over time when one troublemaker stands up and no matter what happens to that one, the next one just comes behind them.

Some months ago Anna and I were sitting in our living room when we heard a strange sound, like scratching and maybe scampering above us. Uh oh. We knew what that was. Clearly a squirrel had gotten into the house between the floors. We wished the squirrel no harm, but we didn't feel compelled to share living space either, so I set a humane trap to begin the process of relocating our squirrel friend. It wasn't long before we heard the trap slam shut and I went to pull the trap and move our housemate out. What I found in the trap though wasn't a squirrel – or it was, but it was a *flying* squirrel. Google confirmed that for us when we weren't sure what we were looking at. Google also confirmed that flying squirrels are nearly impossible to keep out of your house when they want to get in. Our best option was to move it away – at least ten miles away according to what we read. Any closer and the little troublemaker might find its way home, to *our* home. I drove out ten miles and found a nice wooded area where I thought the little guy could make a good life and introduced him to his new home. On the way home though, the phone rang. It was Anna. She heard more scratching.

When I got home, tired, I reset the trap and set my mind to check it in the morning and started toward bed. Before I got there though, I heard the trap slam shut. Another flying squirrel. It seemed cruel to leave it there over night so I pulled the trap and headed off to the woods again. Another phone call. Another setting of the trap, another slamming of the trap door before I could get my weary self in the bed. This time though, there were *two* flying squirrels in the trap – moving buddies they became. I drove to the woods a third time now after midnight. On the way home another phone call. “Is it another?” I said. “Well, yes, Anna said, but there's more. I've been reading about flying squirrels. They live communally - that part I was well aware of at this point – in groups of up to 25!!”

It's that feeling, if you can imagine it, that's I would like for the systems of this world, for the empire to have when it comes to followers of Jesus making good trouble. They just keep coming one after the other after the other and they'll never stop. Yes, we know the world has a way of silencing the voices of good troublemakers, but behind each one is another and then another and another. It is the most consistent and effective tool that the status quo has to protect itself – preventing people from making trouble. The way Jesus followed John and the 12 followed Jesus, may we follow those who went before us and may there be someone to follow us.

Amen.