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St. John's Episcopal Church
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Pentecost VII (Proper 10 B, Mark 6:14-29)

Ah, wicked, wicked Herod.

Ah, wicked, vile Herodias.

Ah, wicked, compliant Salome.

Power can, indeed, corrupt absolutely.

We see it all the time – how gaining power can mean that someone grows into who they really are, leading others on a path toward compassion and empathy. And how gaining power can also mean that someone grow into who *they* are, leading others into obsequious subservience, so that the power of the one at the top increases beyond anyone's imagination.

That is the corruption of power.

That is the power we see in today's Gospel, and it is power we have seen from time to time in our political and social arenas.

What surprises me sometimes is that a minority can wield power. Take white supremacists, for example. It was estimated by a Washington Post/ ABC poll taken after the deadly and sinful Charlottesville rallies that only nine percent of Americans say holding neo-Nazi or white supremacist views is acceptable. Let's say that there were respondents who wished to cover their views and that the real figure might be fifteen percent. That's still a distinct minority, yet people of color experience some sort of white supremacy or white privilege every day. There is power in that nine or fifteen percent. Real and ugly power.

Take bullies for another example – our woman Herodias might be considered a bully, for she used the weakness of her husband, his desire to please her, her daughter, and their guests to demand murder. A schoolyard bully extorts lunch money from a weaker classmate. A board member says, "If you don't do this or that I'm taking my investments elsewhere."

The power of fear.

And on the other hand we have the power of persuasion, the power of reason, and, sometimes, the power of humor. I've often wondered what would happen if, at a press conference where a politician is spouting half-truths or lies the press simply responded with a loud, raucous laughter. Might power be diffused?

We must remember that Herod was at once fearful of John and yet moved by his teaching. Given Herod's antipathy toward the Baptist what would have happened if he had laughed at Salome's demented request for John's head on a platter? Certainly his sycophants would have joined in his laughter, for he had power, and you want to appear on the good side of the powerful.

And then there is the power of the Gospel. The power of grace. The power of forgiveness. The power of mercy. The power of compassion. These aren't powers that the world normally looks

up to, and yet there can be glimpses of such powers and those powers can move mountains, convince leaders, and change the world.

I think of the Peace and Reconciliation process in South Africa. I think of Doctors without Borders, aiding people terrorized and injured in civil wars without regard to borders or boundaries. Midwives on Missions of Service, teaching women in Sierra Leone how to care for themselves and each other as they bring new lives into the world. In our own community, Citizens Climate Lobby, educating and pleading with our governments to protect our environment and the future of our children. Restoration House, Habitat for Humanity, Women's Emergency Services, Planned Parenthood, Clean and Bright, the Goodrow Fund, all doing what they can, little acts of grace, to change one life at a time – healing a broken world.

They have no power and they have enormous power.

And they may not even realize it nor acknowledge their power.

Professor Dumbledore said to Harry, "It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it." (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*)

I suspect what Professor Dumbledore is getting at is that there is great power in humility, in serving others with no thought to reward. Herodias, Herod, Salome, not one of them strikes us as humble – on the contrary, they strike us as mean and vicious, wielding their power because they could. And perhaps because they feared that John the Baptist might be right. The result, of course, was St. John's beheading and the gory platter at the feast.

Whenever we are tempted by power or authority we must be very, very cautious. We must accept such authority with humility and with compassion toward those who are granting us such authority. How will we use that power? Will we hold in our hearts the people who have granted us authority so that we may encourage *their* power?

In great power comes enormous responsibility – I fear for those who may feel the brunt of cruel power and I pray for those who exercise power over those whose voices may be silenced.

Because Jesus told us to love one another. And *that* is powerful.

Amen.