

-I have been seeing my therapist lately and it's been really great. As our bishop has said many times to the Montana Lutheran pastors: every pastor needs their own pastor and every pastor needs a therapist. I think this is very true. My therapist (Steve is his name) and I have covered all kinds of ground from being a pastor and new father, a husband, a son and family member, and just a plain human being dealing with various challenges. I know seeing a counselor or therapist has historically been a "taboo" thing (meaning you must have something wrong with you that needs fixing), but I have found it to be very meaningful and an important piece of being a good pastor.

-One of the things that I have been working on with Steve is anxiety. Anxiety runs deep in my family and I have discovered that I, too, have inherited this wonderful little thing from my beloved family. Since having my main man, little Soren, anxiety has shown up in new ways that I haven't encountered before, who would have thunk? So, my therapy appointments lately have been really enlightening and also really boring if you were a fly on the wall because Steve asks the same annoying question every session that I am working on answering: who is Eric apart from everything else? When you separate Eric from anxiety or the tasks I have to do or the job I work, what makes Eric Eric? And then he asks: what does it mean to be Eric to the full? You'd think that these are super easy questions, but they are bloody hard!! (the other thing about my therapist Steve is that he has a really refined BS meter and sometimes that meter goes off a lot with me for some reason I don't know why.....)

-I think it's really hard to separate our life from the grip of what is happening around us. I think that's why this challenging and bizarre story of John the Baptist's death is fascinating to me, at least, for the moment.

-You know what's funny, is who doesn't really appear in this entire story at all? Jesus? It's not often that we get an entire gospel story without Jesus in it. Just to give you some context: this story is placed right in the middle of two other important stories with Jesus in his disciples. The story that comes immediately before this one is what we read last week: Jesus commissioned his disciples to go two-by-two into the countryside and share the good news. The story that comes right after this one is Jesus and the disciples caught on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with 5000 other folks who are hungry and need something to eat. You probably know the rest of it.

-Thus, in how the gospel of Mark is constructed and written, you could easily insert that narrator with a deep, low movie voice right at the beginning of this story saying: "meanwhile, while Jesus and his disciples were venturing around the countryside and healing others....."

-So why does Mark choose to tell this story at all? I think it has something to do with power. You see, everyone reading or listening to this gospel who lived anywhere at all around Israel/Palestine during the time of Jesus would know who Herod is. Herod was, in many ways, the most powerful person in the entire region. He was a king, intimately

supported and tied to the Roman Empire, who enjoyed all of the wealth, power, and prestige that came with that. This story seems to highlight that very well: this birthday party was one of great excess, wealth, sex, and entertainment. It was pinnacle of extravagance in the ancient world. Within this weird, power, orgy party, Herod even has his own daughter turned into an object and dance for him and the guests, how disgusting is that? Yet here is the question: what makes Herod Herod apart from this show? Turns out, not much. Here is Herod, the all powerful king folding like a deck of cards.

-This story has historically been used in some churches to demonize the daughter: this “evil temptress” who somehow tricked Herod. I want to just say right now that’s a bunch of baloney. This daughter wasn’t a temptress, but an object. She was used in a horrible, disgusting way which is a disgrace. This story is very much instead centered around the joke of the all-powerful, almighty King Herod who is surrounded by all of this power and wealth, yet doesn’t really have a core at all.

-I had a discussion with Pastor Thad Pearson, a chaplain from Hospice of Missoula, an incredible organization who was invited to come and give a talk at one of our Missoula Aging Services lunches. Thad graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, just like me. We shared some laughs and stories about some professors who he had and whom were still there when I attended. He though, has never been a parish pastor. He told me: “Eric, when I was in seminary I never thought this was going to be the case, but I got involved with hospice care and it has never let me go.” He then went on to say: “You know, what is probably my favorite thing about being a hospice chaplain is that you get to witness someone with all the crud scrapped away. It’s not that I don’t have any patience for the crud, but, it’s that I get to witness and walk with them in a new way of living.”

-Maybe this is what Steve, my therapist, is truly getting at. It’s not what is Eric when Eric is stripped away of all the frivolous things, but what is Eric when Eric is fully alive?

-In our biblestudy when we were looking at this particular story, I encouraged the group to compare the two different “banquet stories” that Mark provides for us back to back. What are the differences between “Herod’s banquet” in this story and “Jesus’ banquet of the 5000” immediately after? Herod’s banquet is overflowing with wealth and excess, Jesus’ disciples are instructed to carry *nothing* with them besides a staff and tunic. Herod’s banquet ends in a disgusting death of a holy man. Jesus’ banquet ends in “everyone being renewed and finally having a shepherd for the lost sheep.” Herod’s banquet makes a girl into an object, Jesus’ banquet sits everyone together in the green grass all having enough. Which way is more fully alive?

-David Lose, president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, writes: “[This] brings us, I think, to the very heart of the gospel promise. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than

mere persistence, more even than mere success. Jesus came to help us to imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. Jesus came so that there could be a better ending to our stories and the story of the world than we can imagine or construct on our own. And when the Temple has just been destroyed, or your marriage is ending, or you've lost your job, or you fear your child will never speak to you again, or you're pretty sure your friend has betrayed you, or you think you may just have screwed up the one relationship that meant something to you...then the possibility of another ending -- a good ending -- is, indeed, not just good news, but the best news you can imagine.”

-No wonder why early Christians weren't called Christian, but followers of “The Way”. The Way that gives us new and abundant life. The Way that can fill the core of who we are with much more than wealth or excess.

-May all of us here renew ourselves in what gives us abundant life and may we have the courage to point to that way for others to live, too. Amen.