

“Power Play”

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First Presbyterian Church
July 12, 2015

New Testament Lesson: Mark 6:12-20

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 24: 1-6

A couple of weeks ago on the TED Radio Hour, Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor of Science and Technology, spoke about her tour of a nursing home that uses a robotic baby seal to comfort the elderly.

The idea is robots can be better care companions because they can be programmed with endless patience, and would never be abusive or dishonest.¹

So, here's Turkle and her research colleagues watching the robotic baby seal interact with an older woman who had lost a child. Seeing this, says Turkle, changed everything she believed about our use of technology. As the older woman was pouring out her heart about losing her child, she was being comforted by this robot. This robotic baby seal made the woman feel understood.

Everyone there was really impressed with the possibilities – a robot friend for old people, for lonely people, for kids in hospitals. As Turkle watched it all unfold she felt profoundly depressed. “This was a tremendous emotional turning point in my research,” said Turkle.

Because, at that moment, Turkle saw how much technology becomes the focus of our lives, just when we are most vulnerable. “We expect more from technology and less from each other. We're lonely but we're afraid of intimacy.” “So,” says Turkle, “we use technology to give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We turn to technology to help us feel connected in ways we can comfortably control.”²

Companionship without the demands of friendship-that's what King Herod sought in his relationship with John the Baptizer.

Herod, was lonely but afraid of intimacy. In today's reading, we see him comforted by the illusion of companionship. We see him seeking a meaningful connection with someone he can comfortably control: John the Baptizer – not a robotic seal, but a prisoner friend.

Mark tells us that Herod was “greatly perplexed” as he listened to John, “and yet he liked to listen to him.” So Herod kept John in prison. As Mark sees it, “Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected

¹ <http://www.livescience.com/27204-human-robot-relationships-turkle.html>

² <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/16/172988165/are-we-plugged-in-connected-but-alone>

him.” Herod had all the power and authority of the Roman Empire at his disposal and yet it was a wilderness prophet named John who had him coming apart at the seams, not knowing which way to turn.

Which is kind of funny. Because John told him which way to turn. John told Herod to repent and accept the way of the Lord as his true path in life. You see, Herod had broken the laws of man – and God – by marrying his brother’s wife. His brother’s wife was named Herodias, and she followed a path different from that of John or Herod. John followed the path of the Lord and Herod followed leading of his own heart, but Herodias, she followed the path of pure evil.

Herodias wanted to kill John, the prophet sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus. So really, Jesus is the one Herod feared. King Herod hears what Jesus and his followers are doing – calling us to repent and turn from our misguided ways, casting out the demons that haunt us, and curing those who are sick – and he is afraid of this display of power.

Such a display of power could not be possible with any ordinary man. This is why, according to Mark, some were saying Jesus was John the Baptizer raised from the dead, or Elijah, or some other prophet of old.

Herod believes Jesus is John raised from the dead, John whom Herod himself had killed in a thoughtless moment of weakness, listening to Herodias instead of John or Jesus. What a mess things have become for Herod, and all because his comfortable life choices are threatened by Jesus and the disciples as they proclaim the gospel and perform acts of liberation and restoration, bring people to God in the fullness of their being over and over anything else.

Was there another path Herod could have chosen? What if Herod had never heard that maybe Jesus was really John raised from the dead? Do you suppose Herod might have responded differently to the stories of this prophet and teacher named Jesus? Maybe a little more accepting? After all, Herod liked John. Herod listened to John. Herod liked and listened to John so much that John perplexed him, leaving him to wonder where John was coming from and what difference he could make in his life.

And really, isn’t that what we are called to do in our relationship with Jesus – seek to understand where he’s coming from and what difference he makes in our lives and in our world?

And yet, don’t we more often act like Herod? Don’t we seek to control our relationship with Jesus, make it comfortable rather than allow it to change who we are? Like Herod, it’s all about having the power to **control our own lives**. But at what cost?

Power is a funny thing. Used incorrectly it can really leave us out in the cold.

Like the story of a hotel guest who stepped into the hallway to go to the ice machine and accidentally locked himself out. The problem was he was in his underwear. Knowing he had no choice, he snuck downstairs, across the lobby

and up to the front desk, where he asked for another key. The young lady looked at him and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but before I give you another key, I need to see some identification."

Now that's power. But it's power used thoughtlessly and with little appreciation for others. And that's what we need to guard against in using the power we have, particularly the power to make decisions for ourselves and the people in our lives.

We need to guard against such thoughtless use of our power to make choices at the expense of the overall well-being of ourselves and others.

For instance, we want stress-free relationships with our children, so we allow them to make their own choices, rather than using our power as parents and elders to guide them to the right choice.

We want to control our destiny, so we make career choices that take us away from family, feeling powerless to do anything about it. We want to control our retirement years, so we make choices that put our parents and grandparents in the care of strangers.

These are the choices we've made as a society. And like with any choice, there are benefits and costs. Our challenge is balancing the costs against the benefits to make sure everything comes out for the better.

Our children should have some freedom of choice, but not if it comes at the risk of their spiritual, physical or emotional health.

Our careers should be spiritually fulfilling and financially rewarding, but not if it costs us our connection with all we hold most dear.

Our retirement years should be care-free and relaxing, but not if it comes at the expense of the safety and dignity of our mothers and fathers.

Somewhere there is a balance in this power play of control and freedom. How we find this balance makes all the difference when it comes to our overall health and well being.

Do we use technology to enhance our freedom? Sure. Smart phones, tablets, Facebook messages, and Twitter Tweets, all of this can help us free up time and gain control of our lives. They give us access to the information we need to ***make the right choices.***

What they don't necessarily do is give us the wisdom to rightly use the information we get. And in fact, when it comes to life's most critical issues, all our instant access can get in the way of actual insight, divine wisdom.

In order to preserve our ability to make the best choices in life we need to preserve our connection to the source of all wisdom. And that connection, of course, is found in Jesus Christ. Through our regular faith practices of worship, Bible studies, and Christian care and concern.

Herod severed his connection to Christ when he killed John the Baptizer. From that point on, he could no longer see Jesus for who he truly is, the son of God sent to show us the way to life and life abundant.

And the same risk is there for us. We are putting our very lives at risk when we cut ourselves off from the channels of true wisdom and insight – whether that's the church, or our beloved yet needy elderly-family members, or those whom God puts in our lives at just the right moment.

Like Herod, the choices we make determine to what extent, if any, we are able to tap into – and follow – **God's divine wisdom**. How you manage your time is up to you. Which channels you use to access information these days is up to you, up to me. And how this affects our lives is up to fate, or faith, depending on what we choose.

If we choose convenience over our convictions, force over faith, power over Christ's promises, than we are allowing outside forces and matters of convenience to drive our lives.

When it comes right down to it, that's our choice: to follow the way of Herod, who was driven by fear and manipulation, or to follow the way of Jesus, who was led by God. As you go from this place today, ask yourself, what has been driving your life lately? A need to control, or your reliance on God, on faith? Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you never ask us to do anything without equipping us to respond in obedience. You instill within us faith that allows us to trust you, rather than our circumstances.

You give us your word, which illumines our path with truth. You give us your Spirit who empowers us, guides us and intercedes on our behalf. Thank you for these abundant and generous gifts, and help us to use them to your glory.

Dear God, help each one of us to live at peace with you, with ourselves, and with our neighbors. Help our nation to live at peace with other nations, so that we can turn our energy and our dollars from the tasks of defense to the many needs of the poor.

Help us to reorder our living so that we are more sensitive to those who have so very little.

Help us, also, to remember the sick and the lonely each day, not just once in a while. Remind us that all humankind are our neighbors – in you there are no strangers and no enemies; in the name of the greatest Peacemaker of all, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**