

PERSPECTIVE. PERSPECTIVE. PERSPECTIVE.

July 11, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Amos 7:4-9, 12-15; Mark 6:14-16

Herod seems a bit ... unnerved ... don't you think? He was the one who had ordered that John the Baptist be killed ... and now Jesus' message and passion and following was so similar that people were wondering if John had returned. At least that's what some people were saying. Others had different ideas of who he reminded them of. But Herod was definitely rattled. Who is this Jesus that people have been talking about? And why is he so compelling for so many?

One of the first things I do when I'm scheduled to preach is to check the lectionary. I was a bit dismayed to read that this week's gospel was sixteen verses of the story of John's beheading. Mark spells out the details of the controversy and palace intrigue in thirteen more verses, which I chose not to share with you. Matthew shortens the same story to ten verses, Luke distills it down to just two, and John omits it entirely. Isn't Mark supposed to be the succinct one? Mark -- who tells the whole gospel, the whole good news in sixteen chapters, whereas Matthew, Luke and John take 27, 24 and 21 chapters, respectively, to fill in all of the stories. Mark is the gospel writer who skips the stories of Jesus' birth, and whose story of the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning ends with "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Actually, Mark was the earliest gospel. It's the others who are expanding Mark's stories as the Jesus movement grows from decade to decade. The later writers flesh out Mark's gospel with healings and parables and tales of transformation. So this time, it's interesting that it's Mark who includes all of these details -- thirteen verses about Herodias, and the birthday party, and Salome's Dance, and how he didn't want to kill him, but, you know, he made a promise. A generation later, by the time Matthew and Luke are writing down their gospels, the original details of the story began to fade.

I feel like that happens in our day as well. As time goes on, the outrage softens ... at least for some, and we leave out some of the details. Do you remember the panic of January 6th? Or September 11th? Or Hiroshima, or Nagasaki or Pearl Harbor? Or the Trail of Tears? Or the Civil War? Or gun violence? Or fires and floods and earthquakes? Do we just let the injustices fade with time because, well, it does appear that things are getting better?

The prophet Amos lived in a similar kind of time. Well actually, he wasn't a professional prophet, as he pointed out. He was a herdsman ... and a dresser of sycamore trees. He is the one who wrote the words that Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted during the March on Washington -- about justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. There was relative peace and prosperity in the 8th century BCE, but there was also more and more economic inequality. There was a revival of the arts, but also an increase in social corruption and the oppression of the poor. The gap between the very wealthy and the very poor was widening. And God showed Amos a plumb line.

Back in divinity school, we spent two whole weeks of Katie Cannon's "Ethics vs. Etiquette" class talking about the plumb line -- and how the traditional ethicists we were reading -- all of them white European male scholars who wrote as if there was very simply "right" and "wrong" -- were all coming

from the same perspective. Whatever ethical situation they were discussing, it looked right -- to them. It seemed logical -- from their point of view.

Steve Jobs was once asked about what was needed to meet the technical challenges of our day. "A lot of people in our industry haven't had very diverse experiences. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have."

Linear solutions are not the answer. Getting from point A to point B in a straight line may be the shortest line. It may be efficient, but it's not stable. In geometry, it's the difference between a line and a plane. In real life, it's the difference between trying to walk a tightrope and walking with your feet on a very firm foundation. A straight line is good, but it is just that ... a line that lacks dimensionality ... a single vantage point without the multiple perspectives that give us the broader picture.

I feel like this year has been one of discovering a broader perspective ... multiple perspectives. Maybe we've just had more time to think. Or to read. Or to pay attention. Maybe it's because the pandemic has been terrifying enough to shock us out of our complacency and recognize that we have to do things differently. For our generation. For our country. For our world.

I find I'm questioning more. Why do I understand an issue a certain way? Is there a perspective I'm missing? Where is my news coming from? Is there another way to look at it? Whose story is being told? Whose comfort is being sacrificed? Which corporation is benefitting from this or that decision? What things seemed like a good idea at the time, but we now realize are deeply problematic? How could I not have known about this history? Whether it's a present-day problem or an understanding of history, how is our privilege a part of the problem?

When we were in Pittsburgh at the end of April, I bought a book from the bookstore sale table, *Transforming Congregations through Community* by Boyung Lee. She is a Methodist theologian and seminary professor who brings her experience as an Asian American religious educator to the question of how we do faith formation in our congregations. In the very first page ... and the reason I bought the book ... she points out that as someone who grew up in Korea, her definition of community is different from the definition held by those who grew up in the United States. She says, "the East Asian notion of community is based on solidarity, whereas the mainline US idea of community is more associated with relationships."²

Think about that. In the familiar church that many of us have known for years or decades, we come to church to see people we know, and because of the relationships we've developed over our time here. Relationships with each other. Relationships that we deeply value.

But we also gather because we're in this together. And we're deeply concerned about our world. We are learning about solidarity. About how it feels. And why it matters. How does solidarity change our thinking about the world and our place in it? We gather together to worship, to learn, and to work together to build a better world. We're here for each other when we suffer a tragedy or a loss. But I would suggest that what we're yearning for is solidarity. A way to make sense of it all. Not just for ourselves, but for all of us. Not our own unique, precious lives, but our life together. Humanity.

¹ Steve Jobs, *Wired*, February 1996

² Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community*, p. viii

Across the generations. Through the millennia. Solidarity comes in the recognition that we aren't free until everyone is free, that the air is only clear if it's clear everywhere, that water is only pure when the last drop is clear, that elections are fair only when every person is allowed to vote.

In this strange and crazy moment in our lives and in the history of our country, and our world, many are seeking a sense of purpose and meaning. There is so much going on in our world. God calls us, just as God called Amos, and the disciples: to bring hope to the poor, justice to the oppressed, freedom to those in bondage. If we can risk shifting our perspective, we will find that we have what we need in this moment: a willingness to learn from others, and to listen to our deepest selves. May God bless us in our journeys this summer – toward wholeness and peace, with solidarity and hope for all. Amen!

