

Deny It or Deal with It  
(Hebrews 11:1,7,8,13,32-40; Mark 6:14-29)

John the Baptist sat in a dark prison cell. I can imagine rusty irons clamped on his wrists, chafing them until they bled. I can imagine the damp and the dark and the smell of human excrement. As he sat there John was deeply disappointed, even disillusioned. We know this because the gospels tell us that he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if, perhaps, he had been mistaken when he identified Jesus as God's chosen messiah. John's vision of God and the world was shattered by prison walls. He was a righteous person, risking his life for morality. Herod was corrupt. How could God let Herod continue living in luxury while he was rotting away in prison? Maybe John sensed that his end was near. Well, it was. John was beheaded. If it had happened today, it would have been caught on a digital camera and posted on the internet. Can we even imagine what it was like for his disciples? They must have cried and yelled. They must have kicked the doors of their houses and banged their fists on the wall. But, when it was all over they went, got his body, paid their respects and gave him the dignity of a loving burial. Then they loved and cared for one another, continuing to live life in faith. They refused to shut their eyes to the reality of risk, of suffering, of injustice in their faith. Instead they chose to deal with it. If there is any message in this gruesome passage which is so close to what is happening in our world today that it is scary, it is that the Christian church, the local congregation, the community of faith has to look reality in the face, whether success or failure, joy or suffering, refuse to deny the things that are difficult or unpleasant and deal with the situation at hand and yet in the midst of it all, hold onto and the love of God in Christ.

For the most part we are inclined to deny anything that is difficult or hard, especially when it comes to the people and things that we hold most dear. When a loved one is dying or a project that we have invested much of ourselves in begins to fall apart, the first thing we want to do is to deny it. If we just try harder, if we just run faster, everything will be all right, and we will get back to the golden days when (seen through the air brushed lenses of our imagination) things were the way they should be.

Uncle Bill Roach was (and in my memory and heart is) by far my favorite uncle. An obstetrician/gynecologist he was down to earth and funny. I remember walking with him one evening and arguing about a current social issue. I wish he were here today, because at this point in my life we would be on the same page. But as much as I loved Uncle Bill, he was wrong sometimes. When my mother was dying, Uncle Bill could not

accept it. He kept telling Dad that he needed to push Mom to put her shoes on and walk, instead of letting her shuffle around with slippers on. He believed that if she only worked at it, she would become stronger. But it wasn't her will that was weak; it was her body that was failing. Her spirit and strength were declining because her body had already given up. Uncle Bill wanted Mom to live and believed that if she just tried harder she would. But it wasn't the truth.

We pay a price when we deny things that we don't want to believe. Our denial keeps us from doing the things that we need to do to be ready for the future. We may not get our affairs in order if we deny our sickness. We may not make the changes that we make if we deny the changes that are happening in the world. Elizabeth Kubler Ross has written a book entitled *On Death and Dying*. She says that when we lose something or someone dear to us, we go through stages in a process of grief. First we refuse to believe that it has happened. Then we become very angry. Then we try to bargain with God. Then we become depressed. Finally we accept the loss and move on with our lives as best we can. If we get stuck in the denial phase, then we never find the healing and life that God has for us beyond our tragedy and loss.

Sometimes our denial comes in the form of complete blindness to reality. A loved one tries to tell his wife and children that he is dying. "Don't talk that way," they respond. You are going to be fine. A gambler whose house has been repossessed, whose marriage is on the brink tells himself and his wife that his luck is bound to change. An alcoholic says, "I can quit anytime I want." Sometimes denial is complete blindness.

Sometimes denial is selective vision. We see what we want. Everything that disturbs our understanding of the world fades into the scenery. In church we sing the song, "God will take care of you." We take it to mean that will we be rescued from harm. God will not let anything really painful or tragic come our way. We conveniently forget that God did and was taking care of John the Baptist, who was beheaded, and Jesus, who was crucified, and Martin Luther King, who was shot, and eleven of the twelve disciples, who according to tradition were martyred for their faith.

We read in Paul's letters that God will not test us beyond our limits, but will with every temptation provide a way of escape. And we imply that every Christian has an easy way out of tough situations, and that faith will always keep us from falling. We conveniently forget that Peter, swore that he would go to death with Jesus, and then, when he was staring possible torture and death in the face, denied Jesus and cursed his Lord. We are like soldiers in a war zone, especially if we are faithful speak the Gospel of

Jesus Christ without hesitation. Yes, God will take care of us, but there is no denying that that care may mean great harm, even the loss of our lives.

Today we are all faced with many things that we wish we could ignore. I cannot turn on the television without seeing things that I wish I could deny, things that I hope will never come near me. War in the Middle East, starvation in Africa, a ballooning national debt, a broken borders crisis, a drug crisis, more kids born at risk . . . there is not time enough to name them all. In the Presbyterian Church we have an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is wide and powerful and filled with grace and hope. Perhaps most troubling to me of the crises that I see which threaten who I am and the faith that I embrace is the sense that this wide-as-the-ocean-deep-as-the-ocean message of grace is losing out. It seems to be losing out to apathy, to secular goals that are more immediate. The American dream house, the dream job, the dream neighborhoods, the dream car—all seem to take precedent. A gracious understanding of faith seems to be losing out to narrower, merit based, understandings of faith that exclude the gifts of women and hanker after power. And then there are the divisions within our denomination and others which set believer against believer and threaten to tear apart the fabric of Christian unity. There are many things going on in our world that we might like to deny, but God is calling us to deal with them and not to deny them.

What is discouraging about our gospel lesson is that John's faithfulness ended with his tragic death. What is encouraging about our gospel lesson today is that the God who was present in John's courage and faithfulness did not die. I believe that God is calling us to be excited about, passionate about and faithful to the love and power of God that we experience in Jesus Christ. Clearly this is not the most popular understanding or presentation of the God in the culture today, so we can be sure that there will be difficulties ahead. I believe that it is the most true to who God is and who Jesus is. There is a never-failing promise in this. John lost his life, God's hand moving in the world did not die. Jesus came along, healing, teaching, forgiving, making people new, turning them around, building a community of faith and mutual care and respect. What was going on around Jesus was so impressive that Herod was frightened. He began to believe that John the Baptist has been raised from death. John was dead; God's gospel lived on. God calls us to face the future with eyes wide open, ready to deal with whatever comes our way, knowing that God's grace in Christ is certain and sure.