

## Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of [the things that Jesus and his disciples were doing], for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."<sup>15</sup> But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

<sup>17</sup>For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. <sup>18</sup>For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup>for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. <sup>21</sup>But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup>When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."<sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."<sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."<sup>25</sup> Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."<sup>26</sup> The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup>Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, <sup>28</sup>brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup>When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

*All Over Again*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Mark 6:14-29

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In the movie *Pay it Forward* a 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy named Trevor McKinney (Haley Joel Osment) is given an assignment by his Social Studies teacher, an assignment that Eugene Simonet (Kevin Spacey) gives to his class at the beginning of each school year. It's a year-long assignment designed to make the students think; not so much one that he expects them to complete. "Think of an idea to change our world – and put it into action."

Other students come up with ideas like calling the President to talk about pollution, putting up recycling flyers in supermarkets, creating a Website that tells all the children in China to jump up and down at the same time to knock the Earth off its axis. Trevor comes up with one that impresses and intrigues Mr. Simonet. Trevor has decided that he is going to help three people in a major way, help them, he says, with "something really big, something they can't do on their own." And in gratitude each of those three people is to help three other people in some really big way, and those three people are to "pay it forward" by helping three additional people, and on and on. On paper, the chain reaction to this "pay-it-forward" plan expands amazingly rapidly – in reality Trevor is frustrated by what appears to be a lack of success in making a major difference in the lives of the first three people he helps.

The first is a homeless man named Jerry who Trevor sees living in the drainage ditch the side of the highway in Las Vegas where the story takes place. He takes the man home, feeds him, lets him sleep in the garage and get cleaned up, to the point where the man is able to get a job as a handyman at a local seedy motel in exchange for a room. Just when it seems that the man has turned his life around because of this act of kindness, Trevor discovers that the man has turned right back to the drug abuse which had dragged him down before and he will no longer talk to Trevor. Case 1 a failure.

The second is his decision to help out Mr. Simonet by fixing him up with his mom, Arlene, (Helen Hunt) for a date and what he hopes will become a long-term relationship. He hopes to break through Mr. Simonet's coldness and distrust by bringing some joy into his life and he hopes that this will help his mom break her alcohol addiction. All seems to be going the right way until Trevor's dad pops back into the picture and mom rejects Mr. Simonet to fall back into an abusive relationship with her ex-husband. Case 2 fails.

Trevor is totally disappointed by all of this and believes his experiment has collapsed. In reality, though, we discover as the movie comes to its climax that the cycle has come full circle to the point where a TV reporter trying to track down the beginnings of this pay-it-forward "movement" knocks on Trevor's door explaining that he has traced it back to Las Vegas from Los Angeles. We find that the homeless man has paid forward his gratitude by convincing a woman to not jump off a bridge and that Trevor's mom finally rejects forever the abusive ex-husband with Mr. Simonet's help and finds true happiness in this new relationship.

By the end of the movie we discover that each person touched by this movement has in some way had their life turned around for the better. The homeless man is getting the help he needs, Trevor's mom comes to terms with her alcoholism and reunites with her mom from whom she has been estranged, Trevor's Grandmom who has been living pretty much on the streets now has her family back, Mr. Simonet begins to come to terms with the burn scars on his face and the emotional scars on his soul caused by his own abusive father, even the reporter has been impacted by the story and finds himself no longer chasing tabloid stories but is now deeply moved by stories of the human spirit.

The bottom line, though, is that by the end of the movie Trevor's life is now very different. He is happier, more satisfied with his world, no longer exhibiting the behaviors of a depressed adolescent. He smiles more, faces the each day with a different

approach. When the LA reporter knocks on the door he steps into Trevor's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday party where young boys are running wildly around the house squirting each other with Silly String, pretending that it's coming from their nose or their mouth as only adolescent boys can do. The house is filled with laughter and joy. The same house where just a short time before this same boy was having to empty out his mother's vodka bottles and deal with her hangovers and inappropriate sexual relationships.

*Pay It Forward* is a story of resurrection. Each of the main characters whose lives we are invited into is in some way transformed – changed – made new – resurrected.

The Gospels, we know, are all about resurrection – the lawyer discovering that to find eternal life he has to be born anew; Martha and Mary being amazed by the raising of their brother Lazarus who they considered dead; marginalized people are restored to the community despite their physical or emotional illnesses or disabilities; and of course the Gospels tell the story of how in some way the earliest followers of Jesus experienced something so miraculous in this newness that they could only describe as a physical resurrection after his death.

The story we heard from Mark's Gospel this morning is about resurrection as well. We read in flashback form the story of John the Baptist's horrific death by Herod at the request of his sister-in-law/wife, Herodius, brought to his attention through her daughter. Herod is convinced that this Jesus about whom he has heard is none other than a resurrected John the Baptist.

Mark's telling of this story is remarkable because it is, in fact, a retelling of an even more ancient Jewish story. It's like, as Yogi Berra would say, "*déjà vu* all over again." It is what in Judaism is known as a *midrash*, an interpretative and informative retelling of the story of Esther. Mark's audience, heavily informed by their Jewish upbringing and their knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures would have immediately heard in this story the pieces of Esther's story that are celebrated even today in the holiday of Purim.

Esther (or *Hadassah* in Hebrew), a Jewish woman who had been adopted by her uncle Mordecai, lived with his family in Susa which at that time was under the firm control of the Persian King Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus was in search of a new queen when Queen Vashti publicly rejected and humiliated him. Women were brought before him and he chose beautiful Esther to be his queen, never knowing that she was indeed a Jew. At the same time, the King gave Haman a seat above all officials in the kingdom. Haman came from a family line which had been the enemy of the Hebrew King Saul; Mordecai came from the same family line as Saul, the tribe of Benjamin, and so Mordecai would not bow before Haman as was commanded. In response to this act of treason, this refusal to pay homage to Haman, Haman ordered that all Jews were to be killed. Particularly, he prepared to have Mordecai and his family hung from gallows for their obstinacy.

Esther intervened. She asked the King to prepare a banquet to which he would invite Haman and while there the King offered her anything she wanted. Still not revealing her Jewish lineage, she asked that her people be spared from the one who would kill them. The king was outraged that anyone would harm the people of his Queen and ordered that that person be brought to him. The Jews were spared and Haman was executed instead. The Jews then led a revolt overcoming their enemies throughout the kingdom and celebrating Purim – because Haman had cast *Pur*, "the lots," to crush and destroy them.

Listen for the similarities in the stories. Herod parallels King Ahasuerus, ruling over the Jews on behalf of a foreign conqueror, Rome. Herod is enmeshed in a soap opera marriage with Herodius; King Ahasuerus is faced with a belligerent wife Queen Ashti. Herod threw a banquet; Ahasuerus threw a banquet. At Herod's banquet his wife gets her wish when Herod gives her daughter whatever she wants; at Ahasuerus' banquet his wife Esther gets whatever she requests.

Mark writes: “[Herod said to the daughter] ‘Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’” Esther’s story says: “[King Ahasuerus said to Esther] ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.’” Could the language be any more similar? To reward a woman at the banquet with whatever she wants – even to half of the kingdom.

Yet there is a difference that Mark wants us to hear. In the Esther story, the Jews who have held out and remained faithful despite all the persecution that they have suffered through history, win out over their current persecutors, the Persians. But in the John the Baptist story, the Christian story, life under Rome is even more dangerous than it was for the faithful under Persia. Mark is writing close to the period when Rome destroyed the Temple c. 70 CE and he had probably experienced the killing of Christians and burning of Rome by Nero. Mark knew how dangerous the Roman regime was for the faithful Christians – even more dangerous than Persia was to the Jews. John the Baptist represents the faithful community – faithful Judaism, faithful Christianity – and he loses in the story.

The Esther story is also about resurrection, newness, change. The newness for Judaism comes only after the death of their enemies. Death leads to resurrection. It’s what we typically assume is the logical sequence. Death first, resurrection follows. One must die to all that is old to be reborn into what is new. We often read the Jesus story in this way – his death leads to his resurrection.

But Mark sees it a bit differently. You see, in Mark’s Gospel – which is the first one written, the one Gospel used by the other three to create their own perspective on the Jesus story – the writer tells the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration (Mark 9) before he gets to the Passion Story (Mark 14) and Mark’s Transfiguration actually reads like the post-resurrection Ascension stories found in the

others. Matthew, Luke and John all have these *elaborate* stories of encounters with the Risen Jesus – the Road to Emmaus; Doubting Thomas; eating fish by the shore; the Marys encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Those are all stories outside of Mark’s tradition – he simply summarizes the post-resurrection appearances in a matter-of-fact way. He wants us to hear clearly about the resurrection – which he describes as the transformation of Jesus at the Transfiguration – *before* the death. Only after his resurrection can Jesus die to the oppression that he had faced.

And so it is with the Baptist story as well. Listen closely again. This is a flashback story. Mark tells the story reminding us that John is, according to Herod, resurrected. “Some were saying John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead,” Mark writes, and even Herod assumes it, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised,” and then – only then – does he go into gruesome detail about John’s death. Resurrection is first for Mark, and then death follows. “Once you are raised,” Mark tells the persecuted Christians, “*then* you can die to the oppression that holds you down.” Once you experience the power of new life, then you can die to this world and live beyond it.

It’s a powerful message. The story of Jesus’ resurrection allows us to find our own resurrection; the story of Jesus resurrection allows us to then move forward to our own figurative death to the powers of this world which attempt to control us.

*Pay it Forward.* Once Trevor’s life is resurrected, once he is born anew, once he has found new life as the result of helping others change – helping them with “something really big, something they can’t do on their own” – only then once he is resurrected and new – only then can he die to the oppression of this world.

Trevor’s one last attempt at paying it forward, his third and final, is to help his classmate Adam by stopping the school bullies from beating up on him. At his first encounter with the bullies, he backs down and fails to intervene.

“Pay it forward didn’t work,” he tells Mr. Simonet, “I failed. I was gonna help Adam.”

“Help Adam do what?”

“Not get beat up. I crapped out. I let him get beat.”

“Trevor, sometimes there’s nothing we can do.”

At his second encounter with the bullies – after Mr. Simonet has reconciled with his own abusive past, and he and the mom are happily a couple, after Jerry the homeless man is back on his feet and has paid forward his gratitude, after Trevor’s mom and his Grandmom are reunited, after the reporter has followed the story from LA back to Las Vegas, after the birthday party where we see this newly resurrected life in this adolescent boy – at this second encounter with the bullies Trevor pays it forward. He jumps in to defend his friend Adam and one of the bullies pulls out a knife and stabs Trevor in the abdomen.

Trevor dies. But only after his resurrection does Trevor die to the powers that oppress.

Only after our resurrection can we die to the powers that oppress us. Only after our new life can we find the power to give in and let ourselves die to what holds us down.

What is it in your world that oppresses you? It is only through accepting the amazing power of God’s resurrection that we can conquer and die to the powers that oppress.

Amen.