

- I bring you greetings this morning in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, from your brothers and sisters at Pinnacle United Methodist Church and Mount Zion United Methodist Church, some of whom are here worshiping with us this morning. So this morning, we have the story of a powerful political leader who lacks discipline, gets in trouble with women, makes extravagant promises and then trades in his ideals in order to save his image. These Bible times, they're so strange and foreign to us, how could we ever hope to understand them? (congregation laughs) No, I guess I wouldn't blame you if you're wondering why in the world we have substituted an excerpt from Newsweek for the Gospel reading this morning. This is a very strange story. Not strange because it's unfamiliar, it's unfortunately all too familiar, but it's an awfully strange story to find smack in the middle of the Gospel of Mark not only because of all of the colorful details about Herod's dysfunctional family life, but primarily because the story just doesn't seem to have anything to do with Jesus. In fact, it's the only story in Mark's Gospel that isn't specifically about Jesus. And to make matters even stranger, this story about John the Baptist kind of cut and pasted right into the middle of another story, into last week's Gospel lesson about Jesus sending out the disciples two-by-two. Jesus commissions the disciples, then we cut to the beheading of John the Baptist, and then out of nowhere, here come the disciples again back from their mission. Now, of all the Gospel writers, Mark is the one who is least likely to provide any kind of extra detail. And he certainly wouldn't be likely to just throw in a whole story because he thought it was interesting and it would take up some space. He must have had some kind of purpose for us hearing this very detailed story about the murder of John the Baptist. Unfortunately preachers 2,000 years later still have to figure out exactly what that purpose was. Well I once heard that you should interpret scripture by the same criteria that you use to choose real estate, location, location, location. So perhaps the rather odd location of this story, sandwiched right in the middle of another story, is actually a clue to us for its meaning for us today. After all, as we saw in last week's Gospel lesson, Jesus prepares the disciples to share in his ministry primarily by teaching them how to handle rejection from the villages where they were to travel. Apparently Jesus knew that a message of repentance and self-denial might not gain mass, popular appeal. And now, with the story of John the Baptist, Mark has extended that rejection, even into the courts of power. And he foreshadows for us how Jesus and his disciples will also be rejected by those in political control. For if the common folk of the villages would resent being told to change their ways, how much more would the folks at the top reject such a message? I mean, people like Herod and Herodias weren't used to being questioned, and certainly not by someone as rough around the edges as John the Baptist. (congregation laughs) If the common folk could kick you out of their village when they got tired of listening to you, well Herod had the power to shut you up for good. So maybe this story isn't as out of place as it first seems. Mark seems to be telling us if you want to know what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, well take a look at this. Not only does being a disciple mean speaking the truth to people who mostly don't want to hear it, not only does it mean leaving behind any kind of status any kind of security, any claims to privilege or power, it also means marching right into the places of power and telling it like it is. It means risking everything. Your place in society, your comfort, your job. And if it comes to it, even your life. Just as he has from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist points to the way of Jesus. Just as John was killed for speaking the truth to power, so will Jesus be executed by powerful people who want to keep him quiet. And according to Mark, anyone who follows Jesus must be prepared to do so even

at great cost, even if it means following him all the way to the cross. Now, if being a disciple of Jesus Christ is starting to sound like a little more than you thought you had signed up for, you will be glad to know that there is another option. (congregation laughs) You don't have to be a disciple. You can think the world of Jesus and not change a thing in your life. Let me illustrate this option for you by telling you a story about a man named Clarence Jordan. Now Clarence Jordan really was a disciple of Jesus. He actually thought that following Jesus meant doing everything that Jesus told us to do. So in the early 1940s he and his wife Florence gave everything they had to start a place down in southwest Georgia called Koinonia Farm, a Christian community where they would try in every way to live according to the Sermon on the Mount. They called Koinonia a demonstration plot of the Kingdom of God. Well it turns out that seeing the Kingdom of God at work really ticked a lot of people off down in the Bible Belt. Especially because the folks at Koinonia thought that in the Kingdom of God, God's black children and God's white children would eat together and even worship together. As a result, Koinonia came under intense persecution. They were shot at, fire bombed, beaten up. And they were also the victim of a near economic, near total economic boycott by the businesses in south Georgia, which meant that they were unable to sell their crops or to buy necessities like heating oil. All stuff that's naturally just took part of being a disciple, at least according to the Gospel of Mark. But Clarence Jordan also had a brother whose name is Robert. Robert had chosen a somewhat different path. He was a lawyer, and he would go on to be a state senator and a judge on Georgia's Supreme Court. At the height of Koinonia's persecution, Clarence called his brother Bob up to ask him to represent Koinonia legally. And this is how their conversation went, according to the folks down in Koinonia. Bob said, Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got. Well, we might lose everything too, Bob. Well, it's different for you. Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday as boys. I expect that when we came forward, the preacher asked me about the same questions as he asked you. He asked me, do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? And I said yes. What did you say? (congregation laughs) I followed Jesus, Clarence, up to a point. Could that point, by any chance, be the cross? That's right, I followed him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not gonna get myself crucified. Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple. I think you oughta go back to the church you belong to and tell them that you've changed your mind. You want to be an admirer, not a disciple. So you see, we do have an option. We don't have to be disciples of Jesus, we can just be admirers of Jesus. We can listen to Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God," and think, what a beautiful thing to say. That Jesus was so good. I sure wish I were more like Him. But, we're just admirers, so we can still stuff ourselves with all the resources of the Earth to fill our insatiable appetites while men and women and children go hungry. We can read "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And say, boy do I wish that's the way the world was. But, we all know it's not, and I just don't think we have any choice but to execute criminals. We can write off Jesus as an idealist who was a super guy, but just not real practical, and go about our business in the real world. And for those of us who choose to be admirers of Jesus, we also have a role model in the scripture today. His name is Herod. Now most of us who grew up knowing Herod as the evil villain of the whole Gospel story probably don't relish finding ourselves in his company. But the truth is that, Mark's portrait of Herod is relatively sympathetic. Herod was a genuine admirer of John the Baptist, and we can assume also of Jesus, since he thought Jesus was John raised from the dead. Mark says that Herod really liked listening to all those crazy things that John used to say, and that he was even a little bit afraid of John, because he knew that John was such a good man. Herod even uses his

power to protect John from his own wife, at least for a while. But when push comes to shove, Herod is willing to trade John's life in order to save face in front of the other big wigs. In order to protect his piece of power. In the end, you see, mere admirers of truth will cut off its head to keep it from messing things up too much. Now for those of you who are considering this admirer option as a possibility, I should inform you of a couple of downsides. First of all, there is the annoying habit that truth has of just inserting itself right into our lives. Even Herod was not able to listen to John the Baptist for long before he got all turned around and twisted up inside. And who wouldn't get greatly perplexed trying to bridge the distance between what you claim to believe in and the way that you're actually living. It's no way to spend a life, and yet that's the way that many of us do spend our lives. And of course, the time will eventually come, as it did for Herod, when we're forced to make a choice, when we can no longer straddle this gap. And when that time comes, if we're merely admirers, we'll do like Herod did. We'll sacrifice the one we admire for the things that we really love. After all, Jesus was crucified by people who had once admired him. But that's not even the biggest problem. The biggest problem is that in the words of Bob Dylan, "Everybody's gotta serve somebody." You may not be a disciple of Jesus, but you will be a disciple, or more precisely a slave to something. Maybe like Herod you'll be enslaved to your own lust for power. Or maybe like Robert Jordan, you'll be a slave to popular opinion because of your aspirations for success. Maybe you'll be a slave to all of your consumer choices, that false freedom which will consume you in the quest for a nicer car, or a bigger house, or a trendier restaurant. But whatever your master, you can be sure that it will demand every much of your life body and soul as Jesus does. The difference is that disciples of Jesus lose their lives in order to gain it. Slaves give their lives to things which offer only death in return. So if the bad news is that we've all gotta serve somebody, the good news is that it's a pretty easy choice. We can waste our lives trying to straddle the gap between the truth we admire and the gods that we serve, the gods of Herod, of Robert Jordan, the gods of our appetites and desires. Or we can give our lives, completely, to the One who gave us life. To the One who gave His life for us. To the One who offers eternal life. We can serve the God of Clarence Jordan and John the Baptist. And like them, we can live the abundant life of disciples of Jesus Christ. We don't have to be slaves, either. Thanks be to God.