

## Yet He Liked to Listen to Him ...

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Mark 6:14-29

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I read an interesting article this week on polls. I am referring to the kind of polls that ask respondents to answer questions, usually over the phone but sometimes otherwise. Before reading the article I guessed at what it might say. Essentially, I was wrong. I was expecting a description of how everyone in politics uses polls to either bolster their own beliefs or opinions or how those in politics seem more and more to be persuaded by polls to develop their points of view than to stand for what is right no matter what people polled may respond.

Personally, I think that would have been a good article and furthermore I believe it still is true that polls today drive many politicians to change their beliefs or to take opposite sides because the polls suggest that their positions will not survive the ballot box! That's got to be culturally a tough thing to deal with. Have a position, take a poll, change your position, take a vote, get elected. Certainly, it represents the times in which we live which of course is not saying much for politics and both parties play the game.

Here's the interesting thing about the article that it did say that I'd like to pass on this morning. Take a guess at the percentage of respondents that most all polls today get to respond? The percentage of those called who actually are willing to answer, take the time to be surveyed etc? A few weeks ago, Evana and I received a request to take a survey in the mail. Included with the request was a crisp one dollar bill. "When we call, will you please simply just answer the phone?" The percentage of all those called who actually end up answering questions is only somewhere between 8% and 10%. What that means is that typically 90% of the general public in any given survey is not being considered or are no longer even willing to take part in the polling process. The article I read indicated that it doesn't matter if 10 more times the number of people who are normally asked are called and respond. It's still the exact same percentage!

I for one plan to be much more careful when quoting or using polling information in my sermons from this point forward. The article explains that when it comes to religion or religious views that there's no possible way to verify the information or to readjust the

questions in order to be sure your information is entirely accurate... do you see? In politics it's entirely different because polling is a billion dollar industry today. If you predict a certain outcome that doesn't come to be your polling operation goes belly up!

The idea of taking a poll however does seem to be part of what might be going on in the text for this morning... a text that the author of Mark's gospel tells in retrospect regarding Jesus ministry, and the death of Jesus cousin, John the Baptist. In reading all the way through the text in preparing to come up with a title, there was one line, one thought, that clearly caught my attention. I hadn't seen it before - it was the thought contained in verse 20:

**(Mk 6:20 because Herod feared John and protected Him, knowing Him to be a righteous and holy man.) When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to Him.**

My initial thought was simply, I wonder how many people attend churches simply because they like the minister or like listening to him/her? The text tells us that Herod had somewhat of a difficult time understanding John's message. "He was puzzled by him" is what it says in the text, yet he had no doubt that John loved God and was a holy and righteous man. "Yet he liked to listen to him."

Herod was protecting John, why? I suppose it was because of the polls. Herod had arrested John so why would John need protecting while in Herod's custody? It was because John's arrest involved right and wrong, what we would call a moral problem today. There was a moral problem in Herod's house and all the polls were suggesting one of two things, either be sure to keep John alive or get rid of him permanently. Herodias, Herod's illegitimate wife had already decided on the latter and Herod eventually is forced to decide that it was time to solidify his marriage with Herodias, (his brother Phillip's wife), by signing the marriage contract on the back of John's death certificate. Herod was protecting John because of the people and from his common law wife.

Like many kings in Israel's history, Herod was more of a politician than a moral leader. It's a common story throughout the scriptures. Instead of aligning himself with God's word and God's obvious prophet, Herod aligns himself with the polls. To be sure the polls suggested that the people greatly enjoyed and appreciated John and his message.

They liked the fact that John attacked the establishment and those who regularly misused the power they had been given. Herod was certainly smart enough to listen to those polls. What he wasn't smart enough to do was to ignore or to put in place the evil wife of his brother, Phillip, Herodias. One can only imagine through this whole process that it was Phillip who was the obvious winner!

All of this to say, (and it makes good sense to me) it is always best to follow what we know to be right rather than follow anyone (including any poll) who might suggest that they know better than God.

I certainly hope that when we worship that my messages may fall on some ears that might say... "I enjoyed listening to that message..." but I more certainly know that if my words don't echo God's words, I for one will not enjoy the final result of that poll. Instead of John's head on a platter, it may be my own! I have seen a T-Shirt that simply says: "I serve an audience of One." (Capital "O") May it be so for each of us... Amen.