

“Because of a Grudge”
Mark 6:14-29
7th Sunday after Pentecost

July 11, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
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The actor Mandy Patinkin is most recently known for playing the character Saul in the television series *Homeland*. But some of you may recall a role that Patinkin had much earlier in his career—he was in that wonderful movie *The Princess Bride*, and he played Inigo Montoya.

Those of you who treasured *The Princess Bride* like I did will recall that Inigo Montoya is out to find the six-fingered man. Why? Because the six-fingered man killed Inigo Montoya’s father, when Montoya was just a boy.

And Inigo Montoya has spent years seeking revenge on the six-fingered man. It is the solitary aim of his life to find the six-fingered man. And he knows what he will say to the six-fingered man when he finds him.

Do you remember what he will say?
It is, perhaps, the most well-known line of the entire film:

“Hello. My name Inigo Montoya.
You killed my father.
Prepare to die.”

A few years ago, Mandy Patinkin was being interviewed by CBS, and he was asked what his favorite line was from *The Princess Bride*.

Patinkin said that he had two.

One was the line that everyone remembers.

“But I heard another line from the movie about 5-6 years ago,” he says. “I went up to my hotel room, my wife was there, she had the movie on.

“The 58-year-old Mandy is watching the 30-something Mandy say a line—it’s a line that I said, it’s in the script, but I didn’t really hear it as a young man. For me, it’s the most potent line in the whole movie.

“It was at the end of the movie....And the line is, ‘I have been in the revenge business so long, now that it’s over, I do not know what to do with the rest of my life.’

“I love that line,” Patinkin said, “because...the purpose of revenge is worthless...the purpose of existence is to embrace our fellow human being. To turn our darkness into light.”¹

It feels to me like Patinkin could have been commenting not just on *The Princess Bride*, but on our text from Mark for today.

A dark text,
 a disturbing text—
 the death of John the Baptist is one of the more gruesome stories in the entire New Testament.

All of which begs the question: why this text today?
 It’s the 7th Sunday after Pentecost.
 The 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time.
 Middle of July, just an ordinary summer Sunday.
 Couldn’t we have an ordinary text instead of what we just heard?

¹ This interview can be found on YouTube, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_t3uDVPiRc.

Before we toss this text out the door, I think the ORDINARINESS of today might make this a very appropriate day for this story.

Because nestled amidst the gory details is Mark's description of why John the Baptist lost his life.

Do you remember what Mark writes?

"...John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him."

John the Baptist lost his life...not because he was leading a revolt. And not just because he was speaking truth to power.

He was killed because of a grudge.
Something as common, mundane, ordinary as a grudge.

See, I've got a theory about our text for today, and at the end of this sermon, I want you to tell me if I'm right.

My theory is this.

What if Mark is telling us that the battleground of faith does NOT typically take place with unimaginable acts of evil on the one hand, and super-natural acts of courageous saints on the other hand...what if, according to Mark, the battleground of faith is **in the ordinary?**

In something as common as a grudge?
Something as ordinary as our insecurity and our fears?

All along Miss Havisham knows that Estella will never return Pip's love—and Estella goes after another man, breaking Pip's heart just like Miss Havisham's heart was once broken.²

I mean, whew!
That's one way to deal with a grudge.

I've got a theory.

A theory that the struggle of faith is not in the hands superhero disciples who face up against the greatest villains of the world, like a Marvel movie, but that the battleground for faith is in the daily word, the daily action, the daily decision that any one of us can make.

The Gospel writer Mark believed this theory was true.

That's why he tells the story, a few chapters later, of James and John jockeying for position.

“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,” they say to Jesus.

And Jesus says that whoever wishes to become great must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be last. Because something as mundane and common as STATUS, as what neighborhood we live in, or what car we drive, or what kind of house we own...all THAT can get in the way of God's love.

The gospel says: it's true.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn believed it was true.
He wrote from the Soviet gulag:

² Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992.

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states,
 nor between classes, nor between political parties...
 but right through every human heart.”³

The anger that we refuse to let go of,
 the fear that we harbor,
 the destructive habit that we never find a way to release...

These are the things that get in the way of God’s love.

That’s the first part of my theory about this text.
 The second part of my theory goes like this:

The ordinary and common is not just where evil is found.
 It’s also where God is found.

In things that won’t make the news, and may not even make your Instagram page...things like forgiving another person, or paying close attention to another person.

In these sorts of every-day acts, God’s love and God’s imagination for God’s world will break through...

I say it’s my theory, but it’s not really my theory.
 Others came up with this theory before me.

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part IV, Chapter 1, as quoted in a sermon by Fleming Rutledge, “The Enemy Lines Are Hard to Find,” in her book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

You see, I'm pretty sure that the Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles believed this theory was true.

Do you know who this was?

I didn't know who he was until I read his obituary.

The Rev. Kyles died a few years ago.

Samuel Kyles was the minister who invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Memphis in April of 1968.

The Rev. Kyles picked up Dr. King. After an hour of "preacher talk" inside the Lorraine Motel, the men stepped outside. Samuel Kyles was standing next to Martin Luther King, Jr. when King was killed.

Kyles was interviewed many times in his life.

He often commented how Dr. King didn't have to come to Memphis.

But King came.

He came to do something about the evil and the darkness of his day.

Once, in an interview,

the Rev. Kyles was asked by the interviewer

what he would be preaching on the coming Sunday in church.

Kyles responded with a story...

He said, "I have read that the author, Robert Louis Stevenson, was a man who never enjoyed good health. He spent a lot of time in his room even as a child.

He was always looking out the window.

His nurse once asked, Robert, what are you doing?

He said, “I’m watching that old man knock holes in the darkness.”
 She said, “What are you talking about?”

Robert pointed outside at a man climbing up a ladder.
 Every night that little Robert looked out his window, the same man
 would carry a ladder to a street lantern, and light the light.

Then he would come down, move the ladder to the next pole,
 climb up, light that light...
 then he would come down,
 and move the ladder again.

And everywhere he lit a lantern,
 it appeared to young Stevenson “with his quick little mind”
that a hole was being knocked in the darkness.

“That is what I’m preaching about this Sunday,” said Kyles.

“The work of Jesus in the world. I’m preaching about knocking
 holes in the darkness. I’m suggesting that those of us that have the
 strength and stability –
we should be knocking holes in the darkness too.”⁴

Do you believe this theory is true?

You see, it’s easy to tell ourselves that God’s victory is found in
 the EXTRAORDINARY—
 in people like Martin Luther King, Jr.,
 or Dorothy Day, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
 or Mother Theresa...

⁴ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this story with me a few years ago. An obituary by Sam Roberts for the Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles can be found at [Samuel Billy Kyles, Witness to King’s Last Moments, Dies at 81 - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/us/obituaries/samuel-billy-kyles-witness-to-king-s-last-moments-dies-at-81.html).

Or just in that great, glorious day when Christ will come again!

But I think Mark is suggesting that God's victory is found whenever any one of us decides to knock a hole in the darkness, through the way we parent our children, or the way we respond to colleagues at work, or the way we choose spend our retirement, or the way we welcome the stranger into our lives.

Getting back to our text, one of the most curious parts of today's story is not so much its graphic detail but its destination. In other words, WHERE Mark places it in his Gospel...is FASCINATING.

Chapter 6 is **a strange place** to describe how John the Baptist died.

After all, we found out way back in chapter one of Mark's Gospel that John the Baptist was thrown in prison.

Why doesn't Mark tell the story of John's death there?
Why does Mark wait, and place this story right here?

Well, if you keep on reading, the very next story is the feeding of the 5,000.

In other words, Mark—who is a brilliant storyteller—places in chapter 6 the stories of TWO MEALS, two gatherings in which lots of people ARE FEASTING.

On the one hand, you've got Herod's banquet.
On the other hand, you've got the feeding of the 5,000—
Jesus' banquet.

Maybe by placing these two meals back-to-back, Mark is telling us how God fights enemies like Herod.

Not with stockpiles of weapons.
Not even with a plan to put Herod out of power.
God fights the forces of darkness with something as commonplace
as feeding people.

Jesus, who would have been extraordinarily saddened by John's death—he responds not by going after Herod, not even by withdrawing from the world...but by feeding a crowd with food, feeding them with grace, feeding them with whatever it is that they happen to need at that moment, regardless of what he needed at that moment...

I read a story a number of years ago about a man named Olly Neal.

Olly Neal is a judge who, years ago, was appointed as the first African-American prosecuting attorney in the state of Arkansas. He is, by any measure, an American success story, someone who grew up in poverty, in a house with no electricity, and 12 other siblings tugging for daddy's attention.

So how did Neal get attention?

By shoplifting and lipping off to his teachers.
He remembers being in high school and making his English teacher, Mildred Grady, cry in front of the class.

But then something unexpected happened to Olly Neal.
One day he skipped class and wandered into the school library.
He noticed a book with a risqué cover on it, and he decided he wanted to read it.

Too embarrassed to check the book out, he stole it.

The book, however, was not a piece of fluff. It was by Frank Yerby, and it was good, very good, and Neal enjoyed it.

So he snuck the book back into the library, and lo and behold, he found another book by the same author. He read this one, and he brought it back, and lo and behold, he found a third novel by Yerby.

After the fourth time that this happened, Olly Neal was addicted to reading. Long story short, the “trajectory [of his life] changed”. He started reading magazines, newspapers, even Albert Camus...and Neal went on to attend college, attend law school, become a lawyer and a judge.

The big surprise in Neal’s life, however, was not his academic success.

It was the REASON for that success.

Neal attended a high school reunion years later, and he was stunned to learn that the teacher that he had once reduced to tears, Mrs. Grady—she was the person who set the whole thing in motion. See, Mrs. Grady was in the library on the day that Neal had “borrowed” that first book.

And in an inspired act of imagination, she decided NOT to confront Neal. Instead, she drove 70 miles to buy another book by Yerby for the school library.

She put it on the shelf, saw Neal take it, so she did it again. And she did it again.

And that ordinary act of love punched a hole in Neal’s darkness, and changed the course of his life.⁵

⁵ “How Mrs. Grady Transformed Olly Neal,” by Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012.

Has someone ever done that for you?
Changed the course of your life, by paying attention to you?
By knocking a hole in your darkness?

You see, I've got a theory.
It's not really my theory.
Lots of people believed this theory before me.

The theory is this:

*God's love overcomes the violence of this world,
and conquers the chaos of this world,
through ordinary acts of love,
through simple gestures of generosity,
through common people who act with compassion,
who refuse to give in to fear...*

Now I told you at the beginning of this sermon that I wanted your feedback about my theory. But I've changed my mind. I don't want to have a discussion about this theory.

I want you to gather evidence.

To find out whether this theory is true, we will need to test this theory out, to spend our days committing more ordinary, sacrificial acts of love than we can count.

If you do that, if you spend the rest of your days testing this theory out, do you think your life will be BORING, mundane, hum-drum, ordinary...

or do you think perhaps,

when people look at you,
they will see the risen Christ,
alive and at work?

(Amen.)