

**LIFE, DEATH, MICHAEL JACKSON AND JOHN THE BAPTIST**  
***Sermon for Pentecost 6B, Proper 10: Mk 6:14-29***  
LPC, 7/12/09

Right now there seem to be two sorts of people in the world: those who are hanging on every word of media coverage about Michael Jackson, and those who don't care if they hear another word about Michael Jackson.

Personally, I am deeply uncomfortable with all the stories about the people who have either dropped everything to attend the funeral in person, along with thousands of Michael's other closest friends, or who have put their lives on hold to pick up every detail about the man's life and death now emerging. This concern seems unwholesome to me.

There are theological aspects to what I'll call the Michael Phenomenon that are profoundly disturbing. Let me explain.

God created people in God's own image. Part of that image of God is that people are created to be in relationship, as God is in relationship. To put it more strongly, people are created for intimacy.

I don't necessarily mean sexual intimacy. Not all people are called to be sexually intimate with another person, and if they are, Christian ethics place special demands on them. But all people are called to be deeply connected with other people and with God. This is how we are made. It's in our DNA. We are created for intimacy the same we are created to breathe oxygen. When we are intimacy-deprived, we stress out.

The problem is that other people are messy. Allowing intimacy with them is to make ourselves vulnerable to all the ways other people can hurt or annoy us or suck us dry. And allowing intimacy with God is downright terrifying. God isn't satisfied with a casual wave or a peck on the check. God wants body and soul.

Self-preservation demands that we limit the extent to which we allow ourselves intimacy with other people. We limit the number of people with whom we are intimate, or we limit the degree of intimacy we allow. This seems to be natural and necessary.

However many people are so successful at protecting themselves from being exploited by other people that they have effectively shut themselves off from intimacy. This won't do of course. People cannot do without intimacy any more than they can do without oxygen, as I've said. So the soul reaches out for something to fill its crying need for intimacy. Because the personality to which the soul is attached may have barred itself from intimacy with *real humans* in an overzealous effort to protect itself, the soul reaches out to *unreal humans*.

This is where the Michael Phenomenon comes in. People have shut themselves off from intimacy with real humans, and attempted to fill their need for intimacy by latching onto celebrities. Celebrities are safe. Celebrities can't hurt their fans, not directly anyway, or annoy them on a daily basis, or place threatening demands on them.

But celebrities also don't love back. To invest emotionally in a celebrity is ultimately a soul-starving thing to do.

Celebriolotry, or the adoration of celebrities, tries to fool the soul into thinking it has intimacy, while protecting the rest of the organism from the challenges of a real relationship. Holding back from intimacy in this way, or any other way, will protect you, to a certain degree, but it will starve and imprison your soul.

Herod the tetrarch protects himself from intimacy in today's story from Mark, and ends up in a trap of his own making. Herod clearly has ambivalent feelings about John the Baptist. He keeps him in prison, but he likes to listen to him. Herod must respond at some level to John's message of repentance. He must sense that there is something transformative to this message. But transformation is threatening, and Herod keeps John safely behind bars. Herod's soul is crying out for intimacy, but he protects himself from a potentially transformative relationship with John.

One can only speculate about Herod's relationship with his wife Herodias. I somehow doubt there was much satisfying intimacy there. Herod's need for intimacy feeds his lust for his stepdaughter, also called Herodias in this narrative. Herod's weakness, Herodias Sr.'s psychotic grudge, and Herodias Jr.'s opportunism, collude for evil, with tragic results. Herod is reluctantly persuaded to execute John, irrevocably closing the door for transformation, relationship and intimacy.

In the end, Herod seems more imprisoned than John ever was. Herod, in his way, ends up deader than John.

John is the free one, because he has stood for truth. He has stood for relationship with God. He has left himself vulnerable to intimacy with God. Yes, he has paid the ultimate price. But here is the thing. God ultimately transforms death into life.

John's arrest and execution in Mark's gospel prefigure Christ's arrest and execution. Readers of Mark's gospel know that even the stupendous tragedy of Christ's death is not the end of the story. So likewise the story of John's death points forward to the ultimate transformation of death into resurrection.

To put it simply, protecting oneself from real intimacy is death. To risk intimacy with God is life. To hold oneself back from intimacy and the possibility of transformation has only the illusion of safety. Ultimately such a strategy leads only to death. The apparent risks of intimacy are but the doorway to freedom, transformation, and life.

An imagined relationship with Michael Jackson costs nothing, but offers nothing. A relationship with Christ offers everything than matters.