

Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 15B, July 12, 2015
Mark 6:14-29; 2 Samuel 6

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I am a football fan. Or more specifically, I'm a CFL fan who cheers for the Stampeders. Over the years of watching games on TV, I've noticed that along with skill and talent and discipline of players and coaches, commentators will remark, for better and for worse, on the emotional state of individual players and teams. They will say things like: "it all comes down to emotion... whichever team plays with the most intensity and passion will win." It seems so very ironic that in a sport as masculine and macho as football, what is often noted as the deciding factor in winning or losing is emotion. How ironic that "real men," athletes, are supposed to be emotional, at least if they want to win on the football field.

Being emotional is generally considered a feminine trait and is not something that is highly valued in many aspects in our culture. Perhaps most obviously, in the business world, emotion is often viewed negatively with the dismissive comment: "It's not personal, it's just business"... trotted out should someone express displeasure at a decision. Consider also the comments by Nobel prize winning scientist Tim Hunt, who said at a recent conference: "Let me tell you about my trouble with girls ... three things happen when they are in the lab ... You fall in love with them, they fall in love with you and when you criticize them, they cry." Hunt was arguing for single-sex labs, so that the science - the thinking - wouldn't be unduly harmed by the emotion brought on by having girls around.

The football commentators and Dr. Hunt offer different takes on the role and relative importance that thinking and feeling play in the pursuit of greatness in their respective fields. In our scripture readings today, we also have two different takes on the role and relative importance of feeling, the affective part of life, and the power it holds... for better and for worse. Let's start with the tale of warning...

Our Gospel today is full of emotion: Herodias has a grudge against John; Herod fears John; and at a party for the political and military leaders of Galilee, a young girl also named Herodias, offers a dance pleasing to both the party host Herod and to his guests. Now dance is an art form that is literally about the flesh and bones, heart and soul, muscles and tendons, of the artist and because of that, it can be particularly beguiling. Like all art, its expression is much more about feeling than thinking and the power of its affect can be great. This young girl's dance is done in the midst of a birthday party and with food and drink flowing easily, thinking is clearly is not a priority for the party-goers. Dr. Hunt's warning about the danger of having girls around seems apt given how the story develops.

In response to his pleasure and that of his guests, Herod spontaneously promises to give the young dancer whatever she wants, making a solemn oath: "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." This does not sound like a reasonable political, financial, or otherwise oath... rather, it sounds much more like a rash promise driven by emotion. How ironic that the man who holds the "real" power is so completely overtaken by the affective power of the

dance, that he swears a foolish oath... and then even with a shocking request in response, his reputation and his need to impress his friends by keeping his foolish oath, is more important than his understanding of John as a righteous and holy man. And so he delivers the head of John the Baptist to the girl on a platter. All in all, it's a pretty sad story about the possible consequences of letting one's passion completely overtake one's capacity to think clearly.

2 Samuel 6 also tells a story about the power of affect in an emotional expression through movement. The story of the procession of the Ark of the Lord into David's new royal city, humbly named the "City of David," is also about a really big, loud party complete with music, dancing and a ton of food. The story marks a critical transition point in the history of Ancient Israel, from being a tribal alliance to a kingdom. Bringing the potent religious symbol of the Ark into the new royal city in grand fashion serves to legitimize the new political state. In many ways, what David does in the procession is not all that unique, for such a big party to celebrate and legitimize a new political reign was and is common and it has implications for the entire society.

It was also critical to David personally, because he literally dances his way from being a court musician, military leader and contender for the crown, to being the king of a new national government. This is not a horizontal move, but rather a significant change in status. It is a change that is marked in today's story through ritual, with an overabundance of emotional expression. The story is all about the power of affect. It's not until the next chapter, that we'll hear next week, that we get any kind of understanding or theology, with a prophetic oracle of God's promise regarding the House of David. Next week we get the thoughtful reason. This week we get the wild abandon of song and dance, food and drink, in a ritual marking, or actually making, a significant political and societal change. The transformation happens through the liturgical, and ritual, use of music and dance... or more generally, the emotional or affective parts of life. In other words, in this story, liturgical dance is the means whereby power is reconfigured and new political legitimacy is received. The emotion behind and integrally apart of David's exuberant and religious dance is as functional and powerful for David as dance was powerful and dis-functional for Herod.

So... Emotion and thought... thinking and feeling... What role does each play in how we process the world around us and more importantly, in how we make decisions? In professional football, along with many other pursuits, there is a relatively clear interaction between thinking and feeling. A pure technician or a dispassionate athlete will never be truly great because they won't have the intensity or drive needed to excel. But neither will an uncontrolled brute whose emotion goes unchecked or unfocussed succeed, for a professional or elite athlete must be able to press through hard times or failure, follow the rules of the game, think through strategy and be disciplined in technique. The same is actually true of scientists and business people. To be great - the best of the best - we need to use the fullness of who we are: We need the passion and intensity of emotion to drive and inspire us and we need cool reason and clarity of thought to ensure that we don't go off the rails, make bad decisions or cause harm to ourselves or others. Most importantly, and the part that Dr. Hunt missed with his solution of simply not having girls in science labs, is that each person needs to be responsible for their own part... their own thoughts and their own feelings, because we all have both, and neither will disappear by removing something external or by changing circumstances.

In Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*, the identified turning point for organizations becoming great comes through disciplined thinking. The first step is confronting the most brutal facts of our current reality while never losing hope that we will prevail in the end. This means facing into our emotions about whatever tough circumstances we might face... dealing with the stuff we'd rather ignore because it is hurtful or scary... so that clear thinking about challenges is possible. The second and key step is then in discovering a clarity of purpose Collins calls "the Hedgehog concept". This "Hedgehog concept is not a goal to be the best, it is an understanding of what [we] *can* be the best at." Part of this understanding are the two further elements of understanding what drives our resource engine and discerning what we are most passionate about. The point is that the key turning point is discovering what it is that fully engages both our thinking and our feeling... our passion and our circumstance... the spirit, drive, energy, affect that gives us life and brings about transformation is not about having our heads in the clouds, it is about the power of emotion combined with the power of thought.

You will see a rather vague announcement in our bulletin about caring for people through the end of life. This is about my desire to find a multi-faceted, broadly-based mission focus for our parish that engages the fullness of who we are. My passion is about finding a need out in the community that we could have a unique and powerful role in filling, in the name of Christ. It's about discovering what particular ministry around which we could be the best in the world. The idea here is about being family to one another and to those we seek out who have no family, particularly with regard to the end-of-life. It is something we'll spend time considering, with our hearts and our minds, beginning this fall.

In the meantime, may we recognize and embrace all that we feel as we move through this life... our desire and our fear; our sadness and our joy; our passion and our despair. May we find ways of expressing it all so that we are moved not to rash or foolish decision-making but rather that we let the passion and intensity of our emotions transform into something great.