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In the magical world of television, there exists a show so perfect, so sublime, that I experienced genuine grief when the news broke that it had taped its last season. Of course, I am talking about the Great British Bake Off, or when it's aired in the United States, the Great British Baking Show.

If you have seen the Great British Bake Off, you know why I grieved. If you haven't, I'll give you the penny tour and just let you know that you are in for a treat.

Imagine a large event tent set up on the grounds of an English country estate. The grounds are lush and filled with flowers and green grass. Now imagine that inside this tent are baking stations—mixers, flour, eggs, and butcher block countertops. Now add two master baker judges, twelve amateur contestants, and two comediennes for some levity, you have you have the perfect show. The premise is simple: twelve amateur British bakers come into a tent to compete for several weeks to see who will be the best amateur baker in Britain. That's it. That's the whole show.

And, at the end of the season, after countless baking challenges to prove their prowess, one baker emerges as the best baker in the land. Does this person get a million dollars? Does this person get product placements? No. Not at all. The best baker in the entire country gets a cake plate. That's it. Just lots of good will, hugs, and a nice, glass cake plate that says "Winner" on it. I am heartened and intrigued whenever this show comes on. I see camaraderie, kindness, care for the other, and an unusual lack of greed. I see pride in accomplishment and hard work, and I see a desire for beauty. It's a rare thing in our world to see someone work hard in a community with no other reward than a cake plate.

Of course, there's another kind of platter. It features prominently in our Gospel this morning. Last week we heard about the sending of the twelve disciples two by two with the authority of Jesus to heal and to tell the story of the Son of God. We learned that they were to go from community to community sharing the power of the Master, Jesus. And if any did not want to listen to the message, they were to dust of their sandals and get on to the next town. In this morning's Gospel, we get a taste of the risk that comes with that sort of enterprise.

John the baptizer sits in a jail cell underneath Herod's palace while the powerful folks have a birthday party upstairs. Herod, the birthday boy, is so pleased with his daughter's dancing, he tells her she may have anything in his power to grant. After consultation with her politically-minded mother, Herod's daughter asks for the head of John the baptizer on a platter.

Placed in the arc of our stories this summer, I have to think that the Gospel writer wants to show us what can happen to someone like John the Baptist when his message of repentance rankles those in power. John, after all, was the wild man from the margins, telling people that those

people in power in Jerusalem did not have true authority and that the true authority comes from Jesus the Son of man. John preached a gospel dangerous to the elite in Israel who had profited from the Roman occupation. Or put in reality show vernacular: he wasn't there to make friends.

How many instances of prophets can you think of who came to a gritty end after confronting those in power? I think of the saints of God who fell afoul of the church—mystics and scientists and advocates for the poor. I think of the saints of God who fell afoul of governments—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero.

The Gospel writer is trying to tell us that the Christian life is not all cakes and cookies. There is real risk in preaching the Gospel against the powers of the world that seek to harm the children of God. Christianity is a religion of risk, and it is a way of life not for the faint of heart. I appreciate that it's hard to understand that risk that our religion poses when we sit in a gorgeous church on the East Side of Milwaukee. But imagine our Christian sisters and brothers around the world—many of whom are practicing their devotions in secret or in defiance of governments and armies. They know a thing or two about our story today.

If the beheading of John the Baptist scares you, that's okay. It scares me too. And I am scared for two reasons: 1. I would not like to be beheaded and 2. I do not want to ever be a coward for my God. Maybe you can relate to these fears. I can't do anything about the first fear—that's primal and understandable. But maybe I can shed some light on the second one.

It's natural to be afraid that we cannot risk our lives like John the Baptist—or indeed like any of the disciples to preach the love of God to a world gone deaf. But remember the story from last week—we are not sent out alone; we are sent out with one another and with the authority of Jesus. It is not just we that stand in the face of powerful people—detention centers, enormous drug companies, gun lobbies, corrupt governments—it is Jesus with us all together. You do not have to fight for what is right all by yourself. Indeed, Jesus admonishes all to stay together. You have a beloved community all around you, empowered by God to reshape lives and reshape this world.

Sometimes, we in the affluent American church can forget the risk of living out the Gospel in the world. For us, this story is jarring. Understandably, we'd rather be living in a pastel world of delectable cakes and perfectly browned croissants. The world is usually harsher than that, as our Gospel warns this morning. Of course, take comfort where you can, get rest where you can, enjoy beauty where you can, but when it's time, I pray that we will have the courage to go out together in the name of Jesus and change up this sometime cruel world. Amen.