

“A Tale of Two Parties” or “Does Anyone Want These Leftovers?” Beheading of John
7th Sunday After Pentecost

July 11, 2021

Mark 6:14-29

Rev. Judy Kincaid

When my son, Elijah, was about 12, he decided to read the Bible. He read it like a novel—the whole thing from beginning to end. He would take it to bed with him at night. It was about the time his father had left and we were on our own trying to put our lives back in order. We lived in a little rental house near Lake Michigan. I could see the sun come up every morning from my kitchen window. I would sit and have coffee before the kids got up for school. Sometimes when Eli came downstairs and joined me for coffee, we would talk about what he had read. Sometimes I would laugh because he would be completely shocked and appalled by what he had read the night before.

The Bible is full of stories of God’s people doing very strange and wrong things. He would come down the stairs, slam his Bible on the table and say, “What the heck! What is this? Why is this in the Bible!?” Well, today, we have the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. I feel like slamming my Bible on the pulpit and asking, “What the heck is this? Why is this story in the Bible?” This is our Gospel lesson for today. Doesn’t the committee that chooses our lessons know that Gospel means “Good News?”

Where is the good news in this story?

First, we have King Herod. He is not the same King Herod that was around during the time that Jesus was born. That was this guy’s Dad. The bad guy in this story is Herod Antipas. He is, by all accounts, a very weak leader. His story is worse than a soap opera. It ends with the beheading of one of the most beloved characters in the Bible. Poor John the Baptist! He was Jesus’ cousin. He came before Jesus to pave the way for him. He baptized our Lord and Herod had him beheaded.

This story is hard to hear. We like to think maybe stories of religion gone bad and people getting their heads chopped off don’t happen anymore, but we know they do. We have seen it in the news.

John’s story makes the news—at least the Biblical news. Herod’s birthday party is something those guests will never forget. Herod invited all sorts of rich and powerful people. His family was there. His family **was** like a soap opera family. He wanted his brother’s wife. He was the king, so he just took her. Her name was Herodias. She had no problem switching husbands. The one she got was King. She liked that. John the Baptist did not like that.

He told Herod, “You can’t just take your brother’s wife. It is wrong.” For telling the truth, John got locked in the dungeon. Herodias, the wife, wanted him killed, but Herod knew there was something special about him. He spoke the truth. It was a different kind

of power and Herod was attracted to it. He would go and listen to John in his jail cell sometimes.

At the birthday party, Herodias' daughter danced. She was just a little girl, but her dance was pleasing to everyone, especially Herod. He offered her anything she wanted as a reward. The poor girl had no idea what to ask for, so she ran to her mom for advice. ("What should I ask for," she whispered in her mother's ear.)

I wonder if the girl was appalled or shocked when her mother told her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. We don't know. We do know that it is a terrible thing to involve your children in your misdeeds.

This story is wrong on so many levels. Herod did not want to have John killed. He did it though. He ordered the captain of the guard to chop off John's head and bring it to the girl. He did it to save face. He did what he knew was wrong just to save his pride. He couldn't back down from his promise to give the girl anything she asked for. Imagine committing murder just to save your own pride!

John paid the price for telling the truth. His head on a platter was among the leftovers after this gruesome birthday party gone bad. And again, we have to ask, why is this story in the Bible? Herod's kingdom is not anywhere I would want to live. What is the good news here?

The good news is that there is an alternative to Herod's Kingdom. This week, to get the good news, you are going to have to keep reading. You are going to have to read the story right after this one in the gospel of Mark. Did you notice that Jesus is not even in this week's gospel lesson? If you keep reading, you get to see Jesus feed over 5 thousand people with only 5 loaves and two fishes. You get a completely different kind of banquet.

At Herod's banquet, you get envy, greed, and a competition for power. At Jesus' banquet, you get love, compassion, and generosity. Everyone is fed for free. No one's head is served on a platter. Everyone is welcome; no one is excluded. Jesus' party is not a birthday party, but it is a surprise party! The *surprise* is the blessing of abundance. Jesus takes 5 loaves and two fish and ends up with baskets of food left over.

Which kingdom do you want to live in? Do you want the one where you **compete** for power and money and stuff or do you want the one where we **give away what we have** so that there is enough for us all?

I watched a video the other day about a competition. It was a race at an elementary school track meet. Right from start of the race, you could see that one boy was way behind the rest. His name is Matt. He has cerebral palsy. He was told he did not have to run in the race, but he wanted to. He wanted to finish. Matt's legs and arms are weak and bent. It was painful to watch him try and run. It looked like he wasn't going to make it. It looked like he was going to fall. The gym teacher started walking toward Matt. I thought he was going to tell him to stop and help him back to his mom on the sidelines. He didn't. He

encouraged him. He walked next to him. He stayed there while the other kids finished the race and Matt just kept going. He ran slow, but he kept going. The other kids finished and they saw what was going on. I wondered if they would make fun of him for taking so long. They didn't. In fact, when they saw what was happening, they gathered behind him and around him and chanted Go Matt Go. They stayed with him the whole way. He was mobbed with hugs and high fives when he crossed the finish line. His mother wept with joy to see how happy he was. His victory was everyone's victory.

That is an example of the kingdom of God right here on earth. Herod's Kingdom is about power, fear and wealth. The good news today is that there is another way. There is another kingdom.

I want to conduct to my life, my relationships and my church as a member of Jesus' kingdom. In the Lord's kingdom, there are no winners and losers. There are just the children of God—all beloved, all welcomed and all deserving of care and respect, not based on their merit or accomplishments but because of God's merit and accomplishments.

Jesus is not like Herod. He doesn't just invite the rich and powerful to his party. He isn't just interested in the beautiful people. He fed everyone that day on the hillside with those 5 loaves and two fish. He still feeds us today. He is still inviting people to share in a Holy meal with him—a meal of bread and wine—his body and his blood.

You are invited. You are invited if you are a boy or a girl or nonbinary. You are invited if you are white, black or brown. You are welcome if you are from around here or if you are from out of town. You will be an honored guest if you are beautiful and your body works well or if your body is sick or worn out or broken. The good news is that Herod's party is not the only party in town. Jesus is having one too and we are **all** invited. Amen

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