

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:14

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"... the head of John the Baptist..."

Please understand, it is not my intention to make excuses for Herod. It is just that I am troubled by what Mark tells me.

First, remember that only Mark and Matthew tell this story - Matthew in an abbreviated form. I suspect that he used Mark as his source. That does not mean that the story is not true, I just point out that this is the only way that we know the details of John's death. There is no reference to the way John died in historical material of the time. The way Mark weaves this story into his account of the disciples first attempt to go it alone makes me suspicious, but for now, let's just take it for what it is - a sad story of power and a promise kept.

I am troubled by the people I meet in this story. Herodias - vengeful and vindictive. Salome - cruelly used by her mother. Herodias was married to Herod's brother. They divorced, and she is now married to Herod - a relationship specifically prohibited under Jewish law. John has condemned the marriage, and so, when the opportunity presents itself, Herodias does not hesitate to rid herself of her righteous critic. What she wants to do to John is bad enough, but what troubles me the most is the way she uses her daughter to get her revenge.

All that Salome has done is please Herod by entertaining him and his guests with her dancing. *Ask for anything*, he says to her, and she seeks her mother's counsel. What is she hoping that her mother will say? *Ask for a pony. A house on the Mediterranean. A trip to Rome.* But no. *Ask for the head of John the Baptist.* I have seen parents abuse their children by using them to live out their own unfulfilled dreams. Both of my children played soccer - believe me - I have seen parents live vicariously through their children's achievements. I have seen parents in a conflicted relationship abuse their children by making them pawns in a sick dance of power and punishment. And here is Herodias, using her child to get her revenge. Which is worse, that she wanted John to die or that she made her daughter an accomplice in this act of murderous retaliation. Just a suggestion for your conversation over lunch.

I am troubled by Herodias and deeply sad for Salome, but the character in this story that perplexes me, disturbs me the most, is Herod. What I want is for Herod to be the unmistakable villain, the tyrant, the ruthless despot who places no value on any human life other than his own. What I really want is to divide the world up that way - white hats, black hats... sheep and goats... the moral and the immoral... the save and the lost - I don't care what language you use. What I want is people neatly categorized... pigeonholed in a clear and orderly way so that I can understand myself and all these people around me. What troubles me is that Mark will not let me do that with Herod.

Herod has arrested John. Mark says that Herod got tired of John's condemnation of his marriage to Herodias. I suspect that there was more to it than that. Herod owes his position

and what power he has to Rome - he serves as overseer of this little region at the pleasure of the emperor, and that means that he is responsible for keeping the peace. I suspect that John's offense is that he has attracted attention, has begun to draw a crowd, and we all know that to those who rule by force, a crowd is a dangerous thing. And so, Herod does his job, removes the instigator, imprisons John.

The first thing I would have you notice is that that is all that Herod does. Throws John in jail. He could have had him executed on the spot... but no. All Herod wants to eliminate the noise. But the most important thing, the thing that troubles me, is what Mark says about Herod. He says that Herod feared John, because he knew that John was a *righteous and holy man... and (Herod) protected him. When (Herod) heard (John) ... he was greatly perplexed... and yet, he liked to listen to him.* And when Salome asks for John's head, we are told that *Herod was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oath to his guests, he could not refuse her. ...deeply grieved...* That's not what I want to hear.

I want to hear Mark tell me that Herod couldn't care less about John. That he laughed at John, thought he was a fool, dismissed him, would have been happier with John dead. But Mark will not let me dismiss Herod that easily.

Yes, there is the matter of the foolish promise. *I will give you anything you want...* What was that? Was that a little too much wine talking? Was Herod just showing off for his friends? *See how extravagant I can be.* Some assume that Salome's dance was seductive and provocative. Picasso and Oscar Wilde portray her that way. There is nothing in Mark to suggest that, but some assume that the promise is the result of libido gone wild.

I cannot explain the promise, or the fact that Herod thought it more important to save face before his guests than to spare John's life, but what troubles me the most is that he did it, even though John mattered to him. Taking John's life *grieved* him, because, even though John had been a thorn in his side, he thought him *holy and righteous*, wanted to *protect him and liked to listen to him.* I wish I could think of Herod as some kind of caricature of evil, a first century Lord Voldemort, but Mark will not let me. And that may be the greatest truth of this story.

I caught part of Michael Jackson's funeral this past week. It would have been hard not to. Now let me say, Michael will, without doubt, be remembered as one of the greatest entertainers of our time. If you don't have *Thriller* on your iPod, you shouldn't have an iPod. Michael died far too young, and should be mourned and missed. During his funeral, I was moved by what Stevie Wonder sang and what Brooke Shields said, but one thing troubled me. I was troubled by the minister's comment that was directed to Michael's children. He said: *I want you to know that your father was not strange. What he had to deal with was strange.* It troubled me, that the preacher did not tell Michael's children the truth.

The truth is - Michael was strange, just like I'm strange and you are strange and Herod was strange. Some of us just hide it better than others. But all of us, deep down in places visible only to ourselves, and sometimes not even visible to ourselves, all of us carry around this strange mix of fears and hopes and dreams and disappointments and distorted values and desperate needs. The need to love... the need to be loved. Faith, and the struggle to believe. And that, I believe, is one reason why there was such an outpouring of grief at Michael Jackson's death. It wasn't just the cult of celebrity, it was that this celebrity was so obviously what we all know

ourselves to be: fragile, vulnerable, complicated... with gifts and strengths beyond measure and pain too deep for words.

I saw it happen a couple of weeks ago in Vacation Bible School. In a little week-long drama, I played the Apostle Paul, under house arrest and chained to my Roman guard, Brutus, played in Oscar winning style by Mike Goins. At the beginning of the week, Brutus was one mean centurion - rude and ugly to me and the children who came to visit me at my house. But under my patient influence and testimony, Brutus had a change of heart, decided to become a believer and started to treat me and the children with kindness and respect. Well, at the end of the week, when it was time to say goodbye for the last time, guess who all the children wanted to hug? Not Paul, who had been nice and kind and welcoming to them all along. No. They wanted to hug Brutus - this complicated character who created both fear and affection. Paul was just nice. But Brutus was real.

I am troubled by the people I meet in this story of John's ugly, violent death. Troubled because I want life to be neat and clean and the people I meet to be easily understood. Neither is the case. All of which makes the gospel claim more remarkable. That God knows us as we are - as we really are - deep down... all the light... all the darkness... all the strangeness - and still invites us to the party. Not because we are good and perfect and deserve to be invited. Invited because we are loved. Loved because that is what God is... that is what God does. The truth behind all truths. For Herod... for Michael... for Brutus... for you... for me.