

Herod's Dysfunctional Family

Mark 6:17-29

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

What a tragic story we read this morning. Everyone in this story either suffers or acts in ways that are completely immoral. Or both. It's unusual for us to get a story told with such attention paid to each person. So we're going to do a character study on this story. Often when we do this, I'll ask you to think about where you fit in the story. None of you are going to want to find yourself in this story. But just as these characters struggle, and suffer, and portray flaws, we know that so do we. So put on your seatbelts and any safety gear you may need. Because this isn't going to be a warm, fuzzy sermon this morning. We're going to confront the parts of ourselves that we know we need to work on. Ready? Here we go.

Maybe this will be a little easier if we can all picture what was happening in this story. This painting, *Banquet of Herod*, was painted in 1435 by Tommaso Masolino (da Panicale). Here you see Herod, entertaining his guests. Remember, this started as a happy occasion – a birthday party for Herod. He invited all sorts of high officials to the feast. As part of the celebration, Herod's daughter danced for him and the guests. So far, so good, right?

But there was some tension leading up to this party. According to our Scripture reading, John the Baptist had been lecturing Herod for some time. Over here you see Herod's wife, Herodias. But before she was Herod's wife, she was married to Philip – Herod's brother. Herod doesn't marry her because his brother has died; he selfishly took from his brother something that he wanted. John kept trying to tell Herod how wrong this situation was. And Herod, though he didn't send Herodias back to Philip, actually liked the dialogues he had with John. But Herodias did not. As the brother, Philip may be an heir to the throne, but it's Herod who has power. And money. And all the things that Herodias wants. Since she can't get Herod to stop listening to John, she makes plans to have John killed. But Herod's pretty smart, so he protects John – by locking him up in prison. At least, he figures, there he can protect John.

So now we have a pretty good triangle of tension between Herod, John and Herodias. All this tension comes to the surface after Herod's daughter dances at the party. He is so delighted and impressed by her dancing, that he offers her a gift – anything she wants. Even half of his kingdom. Instead of answering, the girl asks her mother for advice. What should she ask for? And Herodias, seizing the opportunity, tells her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. And so that's what she asks for. Herod doesn't want to kill John, but to fulfill a promise, that's exactly what he does.

Okay, so we've all got this story straight in our heads. Now comes the tough part, when we take a look at each character, their flaws, and the ways they suffer in this story. As we look at each one, stop to ask yourself honestly if you might have anything in common with these people.

Up first? Herod. Jesus confronts two different Herods in his life. Herod the Great is the one who wants Jesus killed as an infant. But it is that Herod's son, Herod Antipas, who is involved in Jesus' crucifixion. The Herod we are talking about this morning is Herod Antipas.

And Herod is kind of an ambiguous character. He has a good side and a bad side. We all know he shouldn't be with his brother's wife. And I think maybe Herod knew that too, because when John confronted him, Herod liked their conversations. It makes me wonder if Herod knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he was just trying to figure out how to correct things while being able to save face in the process.

That, of course, is Herod's undoing in this story. At the party, he makes a promise to his daughter in front of all his officials and courtiers. When she comes back, requesting the one thing Herod doesn't want to give, he has a dilemma. Up until now, he has been protecting John's life. He really doesn't want him to die. On the other hand, he doesn't want to lose face in front of all these government officials by admitting that his daughter has outsmarted him by asking for the one thing he doesn't want to give. But lest we all sympathize too much with Herod, let's remember that Herod is male, he's in league with Rome, and he's the king. He could honestly do whatever he wants to do, without anyone seriously questioning his actions or motivations.

Many of us have been in Herod's shoes. We've had to choose between doing what we really want to do and what the crowd wants us to do. So be honest now with yourself. Are you at all like Herod? Do you struggle with keeping up appearances? Do you cave in to peer pressure, even though you know deep down that the choice of your actions is up to you? Or maybe, you can identify with the crowd this morning. We don't know much about them, except that they are all high ranking officials. And knowingly or unknowingly, they are the ones providing the peer pressure that ultimately leads to John's death. Maybe rather than finding yourself facing peer pressure, you are part of the crowd that makes it difficult for people to stand up for what they know is right.

Next let's take a look at Herodias. Herod is not alone in committing the sin of adultery. As they say, it takes two to tango. And Herodias surely doesn't come across as an innocent in this story. If Herod is open to listening to John the Baptist, Herodias is only enraged. She doesn't want to go back to Philip. She wants to stay with Herod so she doesn't have to give up the lifestyle to which she has become accustomed. She's actually willing to have a man killed in order to retain her place in society.

And not only is Herodias involved in plotting murder, she takes advantage of her own daughter. Her daughter didn't care at all about John the Baptist. Any caring mother would've told her daughter to ask for something that would be of use to her. Something to create a stable future for the daughter. Money. Power. Land. Herod offers a reward to his daughter, but Herodias steals it from her like Cinderella's ugly stepsisters trying to steal the glass slipper.

I'm sure none of us wants to be like Herodias. But if we're honest, maybe we can see a few similarities between us. Because Herodias is essentially guilty of the sin of selfishness. She will go to any length to get what she wants, regardless of the cost to others. Maybe you wouldn't go as far as she did, but maybe you can admit that you struggle with wanting to put yourself first. How far are you willing to go to get what you want? What people have been hurt or slighted in your quest for resources or power?

Of course, maybe you're less like Herodias and more like her daughter. Surely she knew what was going on here. Yes, she's naïve. But when her mother tells her to ask for John's head, she has to know that she's missing out on a great opportunity. How many of you have ever seen a child's birthday or Christmas wish list include things like: a new car, a washer/dryer, energy efficient windows... No those are things the parent might want, but kids ask for things they want.

So although this daughter is clearly a pawn in the tragic triangle between Herod, John and Herodias, she has to be aware that something isn't quite right here.

If you're like the daughter, you may find that you tend to go along with what those in authority tell you – even when you're reasonably certain that they are abusing their power. Rather than make waves or question authority, you ask as few questions as possible and tell yourself that you are innocent. That you have nothing to do with the greater actions happening around you. You tell yourself that it's all out of your hands.

At this point, I'm hoping we're all squirming in our seats a little. Because if we're really being honest this morning, we can see at least a little bit of ourselves in each of these characters. We have two more characters to look at, and these ones don't display major flaws in this story, but we do see suffering and struggle expressed in their lives.

Let's talk about John the Baptist – he's the good guy here, right? He's the poor, innocent bystander? Well, he may qualify as a good guy, but he's certainly not an innocent bystander. See, John wasn't afraid to speak with a prophetic voice. I don't mean that he prophesied or predicted the future. I mean he was willing to challenge and confront people, especially on issues of justice or morality. It's not easy to be a prophet, because most people would rather be comfortable than challenged. Prophets are often threatened by those who would rather maintain the status quo. And John wasn't afraid of those threats. He knew what he was getting himself into when he first confronted the king.

John reminds us of a question we have to ask ourselves sometimes. Is it better to live to fight another day? Or is it better to stand firmly for what you believe, regardless of the outcome? John is stuck in a no-win situation. He probably struggled with which path he should take. If you're like John, in a no-win situation, you end up suffering in one way or another. You wonder

what would've happened if you'd made the other choice. And sometimes that may leave you paralyzed, unable to decide which way to go.

Our final characters this morning are the ones up here in the painting – the disciples. We don't read about them until the very end of the story. They have no idea this whole drama is playing out until they hear of John's death. His death was a time of grieving and sorrow for them. He may not have followed Jesus around like the disciples, but he really did get Jesus' movement started. You might identify with the disciples if you never seem to be a big player in the drama, if you don't know what's going on until it's too late to intervene. And sometimes that happens in our personal lives, but often we see that play out on the global stage. Events half a world away are causing people to suffer, but we are often ignorant of what's happening.

I warned you that this wasn't going to be a warm, fuzzy sermon. Sometimes we need that, we need that word of encouragement for our lives. But sometimes we need the opposite. We need to take an honest, critical look at our lives to make sure that we are giving and doing our best for Jesus. Over and over again, Jesus tells people, "Go and sin no more." Let us be honest today and admit that we have sinned. I have sinned. I can see myself in this story and in these characters too. So let's take a moment of silence, then I'll invite you to join me in reading aloud the prayer of confession in your bulletins.