

“A TALE OF TWO BANQUETS, PART 1”

Mark 6:14-29 August 12th, 2018

Before I begin to address today’s text (which is a difficult one), I would like to share a story from Jim Soden, Eugene, Oregon, found in last month’s Country magazine. He writes: One day when I was 9 or 10, my older brother, Bill, saw me go into the hayloft and retrieve eggs from a hen’s nest, which she had hidden up under the eaves of our barn. He watched me place my hat full of eggs on my head so my hands would be free to negotiate the ladder.

When I reached the ground, Bill was gone. As I came through the door to take the eggs to Mom, Bill darted off with a football in his hand. “Hey,” he shouted as he lobbed the ball. I tried to catch it, but it hit me on the head. Well, you guessed it. I had a hat full of eggs streaming around my ears, and Bill had a good laugh.

Lesson learned: Never try to catch a football if your hat is full of eggs—no matter what!

Today’s text is probably one of the best known birthday party stories ever! Maybe we should call it a b-day, however, so we can also recognize the *be*-heading that occurs. But I really don’t want to preach a message on that so the question is: Why would Mark include this account in his narrative anyway? Well, perhaps we can come to an answer to this during our time together this morning.

This is the only Biblical reference we have to either Herodias or Salome, the more common name for the young daughter. While Herod’s wife has a strong influence and voice, she is off stage, waiting in the wings for her victory. Her daughter, though, is far more central. Called on to provide entertainment for this important birthday party, young Salome succeeds—and Herod rewards her with an open-ended offer.

This is a most uncharacteristic Gospel lesson. For one thing, no matter how carefully we listen, we cannot detect a single note of authentic joy or hope anywhere in this text. Instead, what we hear is a wretched tale of anger and revenge, resentment and death. But there is a lot of that going on in our world today!

This is the one of very few stories in Mark’s gospel in which Jesus is never mentioned. Instead, the plot revolves around two men—John the Baptist and

Herod Antipas, the Roman puppet king of Galilee, and two women—Queen Herodias, formerly married to Herod’s brother Philip, and Herod’s niece/step-daughter.

John the Baptist was a man of conviction—determined that he had been called by God to prepare the way of the Messiah with a call to repentance. We get a full expression of his message during the Advent season. King Herod Antipas was a conflicted man—seeking his own power and glory, while at the same time trying to keep the peace in Galilee, avoiding any conflict that would force a Roman intervention in his territory.

John the Baptist, we know, was a prophet, cut from the mold of the great figures of the Hebrew Scriptures. John was a profile of courage, expressed by his unswerving commitment to speak the truth to power, always a dangerous undertaking. John confronted the King over his adulterous marriage to his brother’s wife, Herodias, an act John considered a moral outrage.

John the Baptist’s extremely loud and incredibly close judgment so angered the blushing bride that she was determined to destroy John, if given a chance. Some scholars believe that King Herod put John in prison to keep the Queen and her henchmen from killing him, a kind of protective custody. For despite John’s rebuke, King Herod Antipas still feared and respected the prophet, considering him a man of sincerity and goodness. Mark tells us that Herod...liked to listen to [John].

Things came to a boiling point when King Herod threw a birthday party for himself. The entertainment for the evening was provided by Herod’s niece/stepdaughter, Salome, who danced in such a memorable way that Herod told her she could have anything she wanted, even half of his kingdom! When Salome asked her mother what she should request, bloody Herodias found the vehicle for her deep-seated anger. Her response was quick: Ask for the head of John the baptizer!

And she did. Salome requested that John’s head be served on a platter as the last course at the banquet. Herod was shocked; he did not want to grant the requests, but he had publicly promised the girl whatever she wanted and he could not lose face in front of his important guests. So once again a figure of power crushed truth, justice, and compassion in one horrible directive to satisfy the whimsical request of a sassy teenager and her vindictive mother. After the

grotesque scene ended, what was left of John was claimed by his disciples and laid in a tomb.

Although Jesus is never mentioned, he is the key to understanding the story, which appears in Mark's Gospel at the very point where the Lord's fame and success is growing exponentially. Many are asking, "Who is this man Jesus?" and he is becoming known. Just as the opening verses of Mark link the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the work of John the Baptist, so here, John's death is a foreshadowing of Jesus' Passion. John's determination to speak the truth to power brings his destruction, and we know that it will be no different for Jesus. King Herod will become the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The means of execution will be a cross rather than a sword, but the end will be the same.

A judge was interviewing a woman regarding her pending divorce. He asked, "What are the grounds for your divorce?"

She replied, "About 4 acres and a nice little home in the middle of the property with a stream running by."

"No," he said, "I mean what is the foundation of this case?"

"It is made of concrete, brick and mortar," she responded.

"I mean," he continued, "What are your relations like?"

"I have an aunt and uncle living here in town, and so are my husband's parents."

He said, "Do you have a real grudge?"

"No," she replied. "We have a two-car carport and have never really needed one."

"Ma'am, does your husband ever beat you up?"

"Yes," she responded. "About twice a week he gets up earlier than I do."

Finally, in frustration, the judge asked, "Lady, why do you want a divorce?"

"Oh, I don't want a divorce. My husband does. He says that he can't communicate with me."

A grudge is “a feeling of ill will or resentment excited by some special cause as a personal injury or insult.” Herodias was a vindictive woman who nurtured a grudge against John the Baptist. John told the truth about her and Herod and called her to answer for her sins. She didn’t want to hear the truth. Sometimes the truth about us hurts. We have held grudges not thinking about the consequences or how they might hurt someone else.

John the Baptist told the truth, and this account tells the consequences, So, even while we affirm with Jesus that the truth will make you free (John 8:32), we also must recognize that it may get you arrested and killed. That’s a paradox, of course, along the lines of “No good deed goes unpunished.” Yet this kind of paradox is at the heart of the Gospel.

Worldly wisdom always suggests that you be cautious, reasonable, and look out for yourself. Keep your options open. Avoid commitments that may later get you stuck. Stay calm. Don’t lose your head. (Sorry, I couldn’t resist.)

John the Baptist, however, was uncompromising in speaking the word given to him. He had to have known that criticizing political authority was no way to get ahead (sorry again...) and could only turn out badly. The same deal goes for us. Our affirmation of and allegiance to the truth of the Gospel cannot be a hedge position. It’s all or nothing, regardless of the consequences.

The Gospel lesson reminds us that the task of following Jesus will never be easy. The road is rocky. Resistance can be expected. We still live in a world where those entrusted with political power live in fear that their authority will be challenged. Our leaders are not as outwardly wicked as King Herod, but they can be often just as spineless, committed to expediency, and willing to compromise if they think it will win some votes and guarantee their election.

The title of this message is A Tale of Two Banquets because the following passage, next week’s Gospel, describes a second, contrasting ceremonial meal....Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 people in the wilderness. Mark is a very deliberate writer; he wants us to sense the contrast in the stories of these two different dinners. While Herod’s was a banquet of death, we will realize next week that Jesus calls us to a banquet of life.

In my work as a Stephen Minister and a Stephen Leader, I came across a book by Ruth N. Koch and Kenneth C. Haugk titled Speaking the Truth in Love. I find my self coming back to it now and then for the truths it shares. It is based on

the scripture of Ephesians 4:1-5. It reads: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” The sub title is “How to Be An Assertive Christian.”

One of the principals that the authors encourage is to be response-able.

Individuals have a God-given ability to respond to life. We are not inert lumps of clay; each of us has a mind and a spirit capable of responding to God, to self, and to other people. We are alive, we are open, we are capable of interaction. We can try ideas on for size, we can experiment with new behaviors, we can test our own thoughts and perceptions as we bump up against the thoughts and perceptions of others. We can change our behavior, revise our thoughts, and understand ideas in new ways. We have the ability to respond to God, to ideas, to others. We have the ability to respond to life!

People continually make choices. Some choices are as obvious as whether to take a new job and move to a new community or whether to choose pork chops or chicken for dinner.

Other choices are not as apparent and may not seem like choices at all. A person who'd like to offer a sincere compliment may feel so embarrassed and tongue-tied that he stands silently, wishing he could move toward the other person and say what he thinks. Another person may choose to keep an opinion to herself during a discussion among friends, perhaps saying to herself, “My opinion doesn't carry much weight anyway.” Sometimes people make a choice *not* to choose; when they do, they are choosing the status quo and its consequences, whatever they may be.

Because all of us make choices of great and small significance every day, it's important to realize that you are indeed making choices. And, because some of your choices may surprise and puzzle you, you need to begin to understand some of the reasons for those particular choices.

To discover some of the reasons for your choices and therefore to develop increased self-awareness, you can ask yourself certain questions: What has been my experience in a similar situation? What choices did I make then, and was the outcome what I expected? What do I expect to happen this time as a result of my choice? The goal of developing your self-awareness is that you begin to make an increasing number of choices consciously and deliberately. Your choices then

will reflect your growing awareness of God's will for your life, your own self-knowledge, and your awareness of the needs of others.

Herod could have made a different choice, but power, prestige, and self-importance had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he would not risk his reputation and the respect of the people in order to spare John's life. I hope you can see a warning here. We are always in danger of making choices that undermine our faith and align us not with God's kingdom, but rather with the principalities and powers of this world. A little compromise here...a little laziness there...and suddenly we wake up in a place that is far removed from where we should be standing as a faithful, committed follower of Jesus Christ. Let it not be so!!!

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose loyalty to his kingdom and the power it afforded him. He presided over a banquet of death. Jesus calls us to belong to him, speaking the truth no matter the cost, working as best we can to bring justice for all, and living lives of compassion and concern for those in need. Jesus calls us to live beyond ourselves. Let us strive to do so with God's help. Amen and amen.