

Mark 6:14-29 Pastor Bill Uetrict 7.11.21 Pentecost 7

I am going to date myself now. But after I read this Markan story about the beheading of John the Baptist, I couldn't help but think: "What a Peyton Place!" If that reference is too old for your memory, maybe I could say, "What an experience of 'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,' or 'Below Deck Mediterranean,' 'Survivor,' or 'Keeping Up With the Kardashians.'" What a bunch of shenanigans! What dysfunctionality! Cheating, too much drinking, lewd dancing, prostitution—all mixed with toxic power.

Let me try to explain some of the soap opera. *King* Herod, or more accurately *Tetrarch* Antipas, becomes acquainted with the Jesus' movement--its popularity, its growth, its bringing healing to sick and demon-possessed people. Some folks were saying in light of the big stuff that was happening through Jesus that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, a theory that Herod Antipas seems to buy into. Antipas had put John to death. One has to wonder if Herod isn't feeling a little guilty at this point. Maybe he is haunted by John's memory.

Antipas' reaction to the rising popularity of Jesus gives Mark the chance to tell the story about John's demise at the hands of the big, bossy tetrarch. Herod (Antipas) had John arrested because John was being publicly critical of him for his affair with his half-brother's wife, Herodias, and their eventual marriage. Don't you love it? Herodias had been married to another Herod. And her name is a derivative of his and Antipas' title. It would be as if I renamed my wife "Billy" or "Willomena." Talk about self-preoccupation!!!

John might have thought that Antipas' marriage was a violation of the prohibition against uncovering your sister-in-law's nakedness that we encounter in Leviticus. We don't know for sure what John's charge is. What we do know for sure is that Herodias doesn't think much of John. She has a grudge against him and wants to kill him. But Herod

Antipas is afraid of John because he senses that John is a holy man, and besides he finds him somewhat interesting. But things change when Herod (Antipas) throws a party for all the big wigs in Galilee to celebrate what else but his own birthday? At the birthday party, the liquor starts to flow heavily, and then another Herodias, more than likely the daughter of Antipas' new wife, Herodias, starts to do a sexually charged dance. You should know that most dancers at Roman parties in those days were prostitutes. And in this case, she is probably quite young. Oh, this is getting weirder and weirder. Herod Antipas is so excited and so drunk that he says to the young Herodias, "Ask for whatever you want, and you can have it, even if it is half of my kingdom."

Well, the younger Herodias consults the older Herodias, wanting advice for what she should ask for. Well, Mama Herodias says, thinking not of money or riches, but vindication for herself, suggests that her daughter should ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And sure enough, the compliant daughter asks for John's head. And Herod, because he had made a promise, carries out the wishes of Herodias numbers one and two.

Come on! This is some crazy, dysfunctional reality television! This is worse than most episodes of Peyton Place or Jersey Shore. But you know what? It's not really that surprising. This is what life looks like when power is king, when it is all about maintaining and growing your control. Life gets ugly, life gets violent when domination or supremacy rules. Herod was a power monger. The whole system that he was a part of was preoccupied with power. It was begun in power, dwelt in power, and perceived power as its goal. Even the parties, especially the parties that are thrown by this kind of system, are power parties.

Look at the particulars of Herod's party? First, who is at his party? The folks who have power and the folks who are used by the powerful

for their own purposes, their own pleasure and power. Herodias, the dancing girl, is a pawn in Herod's party politics. Most sexual abuse, while using sex as its means, is not primarily about sex, but is about power. Rape is a crime of power more than it is of passion. And the vulnerable, the young, often are victims of people's power needs or their fears that their power is slipping away.

When Herod throws a party, you know that deep insecurity is at work. The powerful often experience others, as Herod Antipas did with Jesus, as threats to their power. And obviously, John the Baptist was a threat to his power and the power of his new wife. That's why John had to go. And by the way, I think Methodist Old Testament scholar John Holbert is right in saying, "It has [forever] been the ploy of those in power who are threatened by anyone who questions that power to accuse them of some vast conspiracy." Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Or in the case of Amos in our first lesson, Amos is conspiring against the king. Conspiracy theories often are ploys of the powerful to maintain power. Or if they are not that, they are ploys of the powerless who want to feel like they have some kind of power. The craziness that is flowing from the Q-Anon followers these days is a clear example of that. Conspiracy is almost always about power in one way or the other.

Herod parties are power parties. And as often is the case when power is predominant, they are filled with violence. Power-preoccupied people often bow down at the feet of violence. Often the ceremonies (can we call them liturgies?) at the parties of the power-preoccupied look like the presentation of heads on platters. Violence is too often what is necessary to maintain power which is why it frequently shows up at power parties. And the consequence far too is death.

Now, you probably came here to hear some good news. And I come here to preach some good news. And good news seems to be a

bit sparse today, especially in this John the Baptist story or in Amos' tirade against the power figures of his time. But Mark tells us this horrible John story for a reason. It's a story that sets us up for the next story in his repertoire. In order to grasp the significance and power of the Jesus party, you got to know what the Herod party looks like, what rules the parties of the kingdoms of this world. And it's clear what reigns at the parties of this world: power and violence. But at the Jesus party, it's a whole different story.

What follows the story of the beheading of John in the gospel of Mark is the story of the feeding of the five thousand, where the bread of life will be shared with as many Jewish peasants who want to eat of it. And then a little while later in Mark, a second feast will be held. Four thousand folks, many of whom are Gentiles, will be fed.

Here's what you got to know about these parties. These parties are not power plays. They are not designed for the rich, famous, and powerful. They are for the crowds. They are for hungry people. They are for people in need. They are for people who have been separated one from another, but now are united. Jesus' meals are not about corruption; they are about reconciliation. They don't depend on violence. The highlight of their celebration is not the ceremonial deliverance of a head on a platter, but rather food for everyone.

The kingdom of Herod is not the reign of God. In the world of God, power is not the preoccupation; life is not about power and its maintenance. Life is not about the kind of scarcity that leads to fear that somebody else is going to get more than you. If you don't work to maintain your control and power, it is going to disappear. No, in the reign of God there is more than enough to go around. In the reign of God, there is abundance, food for everybody, justice for everybody, grace for everybody, love for everybody. Power plays are unnecessary. They are what Herod resorts to. In the reign of God, the games are

over. Violence is done away with. We live differently. The way of Jesus, not the way of Herod, is our way.

Now I know that Herod is still real, that power too often runs the show in our world. We all know that because it was power that killed Jesus—religious and political power that operated as it almost always does, out of fear, lack, and insecurity. There is nothing more threatening than the world of fullness, grace, abundance because, well, if abundance for everyone is true, then my little project that makes me feel good about myself because you have less than I do is proven to be unnecessary and untrue.

Jesus went to the cross, trusting the abundance of God. Grace led the way. The powers tried to destroy grace. And they thought they had won. But no; they didn't. The powers of death gave way to the power of life. Jesus was raised, not so that you can go to heaven when you die, but so that we all might know a turned-upside down world, so that we might live in light of what Huey Lewis and the News calls the "ppppower of love." Love is in charge! Oh the ridiculous things we do because we think something else is running the show! Herod and Herodias, and all you other power mongers, soap opera characters, are you listening?