

Title: Dancing With Empire
Text: Mark 6: 17 - 29
Date: July 15, 2018

It shouldn't be surprising to know that I often glance at different resources as I wrestle with the scripture in preparation for Sunday. I was struck that one commentary on this text began with a note of congratulations for any preacher with the "originality and guts" to preach on this text. Really? Have I walked into a trap?

The more I thought about it though, there are a lot of really unusual aspects to this story. Aside from a toxic brew of sensuality, intrigue, blood, and violence, there are some notable things missing from this gruesome interlude. No wise words from Jesus. No challenging words from John. Neither have an active role in the story.

It also struck me that this story is not mentioned at all in Luke, and Matthew offers an abbreviated version. What is the point of all this detail? Where is the Good News . . . if any?

In my mind I am drawing a connection between this story, and the story from last week. Last week we ended with a picture of David dancing with joy and abandon as he was bringing the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. While initially he got ahead of himself (and God) by forcing his own strategies, eventually he found joy in walking in-step with God. And he danced.

There is dancing in this story as well, but it is of an entirely different nature. There is no interest in being in-step with God here. Rather than a dance of joy, it is a dance of manipulation.

"One dance is caught up in calculations for getting what one wants; the other is a pure gift. One is designed to please others; the other is offered without regard to what others think"¹. The story today is a picture of human nature and politics at its worst. I am hard pressed to find any Good News in the story at all.

Understanding some of the details in the story might enhance our appreciation of it. Defying Torah (Leviticus 18:13-16; 20:21), Herod had married his sister-in-law, and John had called them out for it (Mark 6:18). Interestingly enough, this seemingly bothered Herodias, his wife, more than it did Herod. Herod rolled with it, since he seemed to have a secret admiration for John. Nursing a grudge, however, Herodias wanted John dead (6:19). Herod compromised, and had John arrested and jailed – almost as though it were a kind of protective custody. Nonetheless, we know the end of the story: When you speak truth to power, you just might lose your head.

His wife's opportunity came when Herod was hosting a party in celebration of his birthday. Herodias arranged to have her daughter – probably by a former marriage – dance for Herod and his guests. So what kind of dance was it? Was it a graceful classical dance? Was it clogging? Rev. Lia Scholl is a pastor at a Mennonite church in Richmond, Virginia, and also serves as a sex work ally. I am not sure what her sources are, but she writes, "**Chances are that she was nude, and the dance was sexual.**" Sounds like Herodias pimped out her own daughter to deviously wield power. I can almost imagine the back of Herodias' jacket: "I really don't care. Do you?"

After watching his stepdaughter/niece/grandniece dance naked, a presumably titillated Herod makes an oath, to give the girl whatever she desires, up to half of his kingdom. I don't want to lose our train of thought here, but it almost seems as though we've stumbled upon another story where the man is portrayed as the helpless victim under the spell of the temptress. It is an old story.

After consulting her mother, the girl sprang the trap, saying, **“I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”** (6:25) Herod was caught. Saving face was a big issue (6:26); worse, defaulting on an oath could be reckoned as tantamount to taking God’s name in vain (Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.9-10). The birth day morphed into a death day: John’s head was delivered to the girl, who then passed it on to her mother. Yet another story of a young person being seduced and schooled in the ways of death by a manipulative parent.

And here is a detail I bet you missed. Just like the TV series *Dallas*, fraught with power and manipulation, all of verses 17 – 29 that we read are actually a flashback. This was all set up in verses 14 – 16 where King Herod is stunned by stories he was starting to hear about Jesus. Apparently he kept thinking over and over about what he had done, and now he blurts out, **“John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”** (6:16) Though he had felt horrible – and horribly manipulated – he didn’t have the spine to resist.

And though there is no Good News in this story per se, it serves as a stark contrast to the story that follows: The feeding of the 5,000 where Jesus mingles with and blesses the common person. There is a stark contrast between the debaucheries of the Herodian banquet, and the banquet that Jesus prepares of the loaves and the fishes for the common people.

And speaking of parallels, Herod foreshadows Pilate in the same way that John foreshadows Jesus (1:1-15; 9:9-13; 11:27-33). Remember Pilate, the man who was washing his hands of Jesus’ execution? Pilate was also amazed by circumstances surrounding an innocent prisoner, swept up in events that fast spin out of his control, and unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered. Like John, Jesus is passive in his final hours, facing with integrity his moment of truth, and is executed by hideous capital punishment, dying to placate those he offends (6:19, 25; 15:10-14). When repentance is preached to this world’s princes, do not expect them to relinquish their power, however conflicted some may be.

There is no end to power’s deception and corruption. While we don’t need the Bible to corroborate that statement, when it does we are assured that the scriptural narrative is not naïve. Our faith tradition is clear-sighted about the realities we live with.

The levels of power gone awry narrated in the gospel lesson today could be a soap opera, or primetime television at its best. When power usurps mercy - when power demands drama - when power manipulates and connives and only looks out for the self, well . . . there is power in its most destructive form. Are you reading the news?

Karoline M. Lewis writes, **“it’s all about power misused. And the wielding of power for the purpose of destruction has been more than potent lately. Damaging. Demoralizing. Debilitating. Demeaning. Desecrating. Discriminating.”**

While we do have the responsibility to “call out” abuse of power, as Christians we also have the potential to either recognize or dismiss *the origin* of destructive power.

Where you start determines your end. Do you start with domination or dignity? Do you start with self-service or true service to the other? Do you start with self-protection or honor? Herod starts from self-preservation. The young girl starts with pleasing her mother. The mother starts with protecting her persona. The starting point of your power matters. Look where they all end up.

Karoline M. Lewis continues, **“If you cannot articulate the seat of your own power, recognize that you have it, that you know what to do with it, then your power will have the potential to disempower. If you do not know the starting place of your power - and whether or not it**

comes from love and dignity and honor and glory - then abuse of power is just around the corner."

Personally, I am tired of the kind of power that has no regard, none at all, for the other. The power that seems to act as if disregard for the other is acceptable. The kind of power that is reckless and relentless and ruthless. I am tired of the power that overlooks potential and possibility in favor of trends. I am tired of the power that thinks it has all the answers and that those around it cannot contribute to the potential of the whole. I am tired of the power that does not listen. I am tired of the power that marginalizes conversation.

But this is a sermon, so we must consider how our God manifests power. God's power has as its end the hope of relationship. God's power is for the sake of love. God's power is seen in self-sacrifice.

This then becomes the litmus test for power, does it not? When power's starting point is money / the bottom line / rules / control / competition / manipulation . . . that's not power. That's bullying. That's abuse. That's nothing else than one getting one's way. That's force. That's coercion. That's narcissism. And that kind of power leads to a head on a platter. A rather grotesque image, yet, if we are honest, full of truth. These past weeks have indicated that there is no lack of illustrations to help us contemplate this issue of power. It takes a biblical imagination, however, to offer an alternative and corrective.

When you dance with empire, when you speak truth to power, you do run the risk of a lopped head or a lingering death. Like Herod suspected however, maybe John *did* arise in the person of Jesus. Maybe we will continually arise, from one generation to the next, be found in Christ, and invite others to join in an altogether different kind of dance.

Amen.

Two Dances by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Mark 6: 17 – 29

The Death of John the Baptist

“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.