

Herod's Banquet  
Matthew 14:1-12

How did it all go wrong? Herod probably thought he was an okay guy, at least at first, at least when compared to his dad, Herod the Great. That Herod was the King of Israel at the time Jesus was born. That was the Herod portrayed in our Christmas pageant, the one who wanted all the little boys in Bethlehem to be killed because he was afraid one of them might threaten his throne. But that Herod's irrational fear eventually reached into his own family. In fact, Herod the Great had his wife Mariamne put to death in 29 BC, and in 7 BC he killed the two sons she had borne to him, Alexander and Aristobulus.

But before Aristobulus died, he had a daughter named Herodias, whom we meet in verse 3. So, that makes Herodias the granddaughter of Herod the Great. Now, when Herodias grew up, she was married first to Herod Philip, another one of Herod's the Great's sons – although, since Herod Philip had a different mother than her father did, I suppose he was technically only her half-uncle. She and Herod Philip had a daughter, Salome – the dancing girl we meet in verse 6.

Anyway, when Herodias and Herod Philip were living in Rome, another one of Herod the Great's sons by yet another wife, Herod Antipas, came to visit them – that's the king Herod of today's passage. Although Herod Antipas was also married, he fell in love with Herodias. So, Herod Antipas divorced his wife of twenty years and married his half-brother's wife who was also his half-niece. Even in today's rather free-wheeling marital culture, I think we can understand why verse 4 says John objected to all of this.

Of course, we can also understand why Herodias and Herod Antipas didn't want John to go on telling everyone that they were living in sin, that they had no right to be married. And we don't have a hard time believing that Herod would try to punish John for criticizing his marital decisions – I mean, he wasn't the only wealthy, powerful person who has rejected what the Bible says about marriage, was he?

I mean, look at what we Americans increasingly believe, wealthy and powerful as we are by both global and historical standards. Oh, many of our ancestors held the Biblical view that happiness in marriage is largely a byproduct of its main business: glorifying God, pursuing sanctification as a couple, and bringing up children in a safe and stable environment. But many people today have tried to short-circuit the process, trying to get the byproduct without the hard work that produces it. Forgetting how a relationship with Christ and how consistent demonstration of His self-sacrificial, unconditional love is essential for any successful marriage, and neglecting the traditional wedding vows that promise fidelity even when the worst of life such as poverty and sickness may come our way, many Americans now believe that marriage should last only for better, for richer, and in health – after all, why stick around if you're not feeling happy and fulfilled?

So perhaps it's no wonder that the broader culture has taken the next logical step – if marriage is just about happiness, then why rule out the kind of happiness between two men, or between two women? In fact, why not allow men to say they are women or women to insist that they are men – if that's what makes them happy? Some even use this same line of argument to say that what Herod did, marrying his niece, is perfectly alright as long as both of them are consenting adults.

Oh, and as for those who would call into question this new pursuit of happiness, this new worship of feelings, well why not consider them to be narrowminded, puritanical, hateful bigots? Why

not try to cancel them, to stifle their voices, to remove their opinions from the public square and from polite society? When emotion is your god, those who blaspheme that god must be punished.

Now, I doubt that anyone is going to be executed like John was for preaching the Biblical standard of marriage as between one man and one woman for a lifetime. But the story of John's death proves that the opposition of the wealthy and the powerful to the church's teachings on sex and marriage is nothing new. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised when a certain amount of ridicule or unpopularity, or perhaps even some suffering comes our way, when we proclaim what the Bible says.

Well, it would be easy for us to stop here, and let this story simply feed our outrage with those who disagree with us on marriage and family issues. But there's an even more urgent and intimate lesson we all need to learn from the frankly horrible story of Herod and his family – and that is the danger that all of us face whenever we tolerate any kind of sin in our lives.

For remember, Herod didn't start out as a monster – he didn't want to kill John, at least not at first. Sure, he threw him in jail to put a stop to his preaching – after all, Herod's pride wouldn't allow John to continue to embarrass him in public. But Herod wasn't the one who wanted John dead – that was Herodias' idea, not his. No, Herod was content to keep John in jail.

Why is that? Well, regardless of their opinions to the contrary, the power and rule even of absolute monarchs like Herod depend on what our Declaration of Independence calls "the consent of the governed." As kings from Charles II of England to Louis XVI of France to Czar Nicholas II of Russia have discovered, when enough of your subjects want you off the throne or even dead, it doesn't matter how many soldiers you have protecting you.

And so, as verse 5 points out, Herod was engaging in the most basic of political calculus where it came to John. Yes, John may have been obnoxious and insulting, but he had baptized a big portion of the population of Israel. That meant a lot of Herod's subjects believed John to be a holy man, a true prophet of God. So, what might they do to Herod if, to gratify his pride and justify his lust, he were to have John executed – might there be a revolution? No, Herod knew John had to be silenced, but killing him would be too great a risk.

And so, when you get right down to it, Herod wasn't a comic-book villain. He wasn't a monster. No, he was a lot like many people are today – doing what feels good and what makes rational sense. Herod had heard John explain what the Word of God teaches about marriage. But he just didn't want to do what it says – at least not if that meant making radical changes in his lifestyle, not if that meant giving up pride and lust, the two things that he thought would make him happy.

And maybe that's where some of us are today – respecting the Bible, and perhaps even admitting that it is truly the Word of God, but not doing everything it tells us. And no, such disobedience isn't confined to marital issues, although the Biblical standard for marriage is indeed difficult. Husbands, how easy is it for you to love your wives in a truly self-sacrificial way all the time? Wives, how easy is it for you to respect your husbands all the time? Indeed, how many marriages have become exercises in boundary setting, in blame shifting, in resentment nurturing, in manipulation? There's a lot more to Christian marriage than just being constituted of one man and one woman, isn't there?

But there are lots of other sins that we all too easily ignore. How many of us have problems with pride like Herod did? Do any of us, for example, ever catch ourselves looking down on those prudes or libertines who are on the opposite side of all these pressing moral and social issues? And

even if we don't personally experience gender dysphoria or same-sex attractions, how many of us have other kinds of problems with lust, selfishly desiring people or relationships that God has not intended for us to have?

Or let's push this point a bit further. When we see injustice and wickedness exploding all around us, how many of us have a hard time loving and forgiving our enemies? And in our modern climate of confusion and change, how many of us have problems with fear and anxiety, refusing to trust Jesus even though He has promised to take care of us? In short, how many of us know good and well what Jesus wants us to do, but, like Herod, we just aren't doing it?

Okay, so what happened because Herod tolerated and even encouraged the sin in his life? What happened because he kept on clinging to his pride and his lust? In verse 6, we find Herod indulging his pride by throwing a party, but this is not the same sort of hospitality the next part of this chapter describes Jesus providing for 5000 families on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. For while Jesus provided abundant, if plain fare for those who had nothing, the parallel passage in Mark tells us that Herod only invited the lords and the high captains to his banquet. In other words, the same pride that led Herod to throw John in jail meant that Herod only wanted to be around those he considered to be the best people in society.

And in verse 6, we see more of Herod's sin on display, don't we? We've already noticed his weakness for women, regardless of how closely they might be related to him. So, when his wife's daughter came in to dance before him and his friends, he was so pleased with her that he promised to give her whatever she asked – words that were of course much more appropriate for a loving husband than for a doting great-uncle or stepfather – and remember, Herod was both of these things to Salome.

Yes, because Herod kept on feeding his pride and his lust, Herodias seized the opportunity that both of these sins had provided. Since Herod had promised to give Salome anything she wanted, Herodias prompted her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist to be cut off.

Now, in a very real sense, Herodias was just taking advantage of the priorities that Herod had already acted on – it was his pride and his lust that had driven him to send John to jail. But now, if he wanted to save John from Herodias' trap, Herod would have to put aside both of those things. For if Herod were to go back on his word, he would have been humiliated in the eyes of his wealthy and powerful friends, and his pride could not endure that. In the same way, unless he gave Salome what she asked, whatever perverse intentions he might have had toward her would have been extinguished then and there.

So, why did Herod make the choice he did? Why did he kill John, which verse 9 makes clear was something he was sorry about, something he didn't really want to do? Because for so many years he had put his pet sins, pride and lust, ahead of God's Word. So, when he was finally forced to make a choice between righteousness and sin, he kept on doing what he had always done – even though the result certainly didn't make him happy.

And that's the danger for all of us as well. For if we imagine that we can domesticate our sin, that we can keep it under control, that we can put it on a leash over in a corner where it won't bother the rest of our spiritual life, we are kidding ourselves. If we imagine that we can hold back any part of our lives from God's authority and control, we will eventually end up having to make the same choice Herod made. And we'll most likely do what he did – choosing whatever is most important to us, whatever feels good or makes sense to our own reason.

For isn't that what Paul warned us about in our responsive reading this morning? We will reap whatever it is that we sow. If we plant in the field of our flesh, appealing to and encouraging our natural desires, we will reap a harvest of death, just like Herod did. For the more he fed his pride and lust in the pursuit of happiness, the more such happiness eluded his grip. He ended up being driven to the edge of madness over his crimes, even imagining in verse 2 that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead to torment him.

But there is another way. For what else did Paul tell us? Instead of encouraging our fleshly natures, we can plant in the field of the Spirit, nurturing the good and godly interests and desires in our hearts. And if we sow to the Spirit, what is the fruit He produces in our lives? Not pride and lust, but love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. Who wouldn't want those things?

Ah, but who did Paul say are the people who sow this seed and who reap this fruit? Those who belong to Christ, those who have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires. For Jesus didn't insist on His own happiness in life, did He? Jesus didn't try to leverage His power in order to get His own way, did He? No, even when the Father asked Him to die an unjust, undeserved death, to give Himself up for a world full of sinners who despised and rejected Him, Jesus said, "Not my will, but thine be done." And He calls all those who follow Him to do the same thing, taking up our own cross, denying our own desires, dying to ourselves for the glory of God and for the good of others – for that's what love really means, regardless of what all those Romantic poets and songwriters have said.

Yes, Herod surrounded himself with guests and food and entertainment so that he could indulge himself, his pride and his lust – and the result was not happiness but sorrow and despair and death. On the other hand, as we'll see next week, those who went out into the wilderness near the Sea of Galilee expected no glamour, no entertainment, no physical food at all. But because they drew near to Jesus, they ended up not only with full stomachs, but with the promise of everlasting life. So, which banquet will you attend? In which field will you plant your seed? Whose path will you follow?