

## **Mark 6:14-44**

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

### **"A Tale of Two Feasts"**

Our text begs the question: whose rule reigns in our hearts and what type of power will we follow? There is a collision in our text. Two stories hit, head on. Only one story, or the other, can rule our hearts.

I'd never heard anyone suggest that the death of John the Baptist and Jesus' Feeding the Five Thousand might shed some light on one another. They are totally split apart in the lectionary. I've never heard them preached on together. But this May while I

was attending the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Barbara Lundblad who is a Presbyterian minister and homiletics professor suggested that these passages might need to be taken together. We could, she suggested, ditch the lectionary for a move that makes some common sense.

One approach to taking these texts together might be to ask what the death of a prophet has to do with the miracle of abundant food for a bunch of seeking people? Wait a minute! These words ring with sacramental familiarity. Might these two stories taken together foreshadow Jesus' death and the significance of his table for his followers?

Another more obvious editorial move by Mark, the one we will concentrate on this morning, is that we have before us a tale of two feasts. Could the two feasts be any more disparate? One is held in the seat of power; the other in a deserted place. One is an elaborate birthday party with an invited guest list; the other was an attempt to flee from crowds and seek a little solitude—and ended up an open teach-in for people who weren't invited at all. One lavishes food upon the ranking guests while some just outside the walls of the room are surely starving; the other is a motley crew, under stocked even in simple foods, yet abundant food is provided for all.

Two feasts are recounted in a row. They are as different as night and day yet Mark wants us to hear these stories next to one another.

Mark tells us Herod was often perplexed by John, yet he liked to listen to him...except when he warned Herod about his sin in marrying his brother's wife while he was still alive! At Herod's party, his niece entertained the dignitaries and Herod, and they were so enthralled that he told her she could ask for anything and he would give it to her. When it came back from mommy that Herodias wanted the head of John the Baptist as fulfillment of his oath, Herod felt there wasn't much he could do. There were all the guests he had made it in front of to consider. Herod chose to use his power in cruel ways to gain respect and drive fear into the hearts of others.

The one who ruled at the palace banquet cared more about the power of wealth and his image than he did of taking care of those in need under his authority. For Herod there was only one reasonable solution, to fulfill the request and behead John.

Barbara Lundblad noted at the conference, "Herod's feast is shaped by the rubrics of the empire. His allegiance now is to Rome, to Caesar, more than to Torah. On his small stage, the empire defined the priorities.... The head of John was brought out on a platter—a terrible leftover at the feast of Herod."

One of my professors from seminary, Dr. Brian Blount says in his book on the Gospel of Mark, "At the banquet in the desert, there is one reasonable thing to do: send the people away so they can fend for themselves. Jesus, however, won't cooperate."<sup>1</sup>

If Herod had been in the desert with Jesus at the teach-in he would have agreed with the disciples, "Send them away." Let the little people fend for themselves and go off to find food on their own.

Jesus takes another point of view from Herod's; he cares for those in need who are under his authority. Not only does he show compassion for those under his authority, he makes his disciples join him in his reign of compassion! "You give them something to eat." The One who rules the desert banquet is so filled with compassion that all become invited guests; all are nourished. The feast in the desert counters in every way the power yielded at Herod's feast. It's a whole new vision.

The grass was green in the desert that day. The disciples couldn't see it in the beginning, but they witnessed it as Jesus sent them to carry out his compassion, collecting the five loaves and two fish, which somehow became more than enough for all to eat. "You give them something to eat." Mark lets us know that we are going to have to take our place in God's reign. We are a part of God's ongoing work and we too must take risks to care for others even when it seems like we lack the resources to do so.

People who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ are bound to upset the powers that be around them. Just like John the Baptist upset Herodias. Truths must be spoken though, and works of compassion followed. The good news for followers of Jesus is that, "if John's story shows the cost of discipleship, Mark goes on to show that God will not be stopped."<sup>2</sup> Not by Herod killing John the Baptist, not by lack of resources, not even by Jesus' death. God's rule of the world, God's power cannot be stopped.

We follow our God who made a way where there wasn't one assuring us of life after death! God even made a way for us to be sustained for the journey of faith through the sacraments. Our baptisms claim us and proclaim that we are marked by God's grace forever; therefore, we are able to join in protesting worldly powers contrary to God's will just as Jesus did at the feast in the desert.

Mark illustrates the collision between two different notions of where power comes from, and how it should be wielded in the stories. "Trust in Jesus, says Mark, rather than in the enchanting, enticing, and often deadly lure of earthly power in whatever form it is lodged."<sup>3</sup>

Whose reign will we follow? The truth is that our actions, like Herod's, speak louder than our inquiries about faith or our confessions of faith. The compassion of Jesus for all who he encountered is a discipleship orientation, a guide for our lives. May the grace and power displayed at the feast in the desert rule in our hearts and lives. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (WJKP: Louisville 2002) 113.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 115.

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