

I have a wee confession that might not be appropriate given where we are in our Country, but I have a tiny fascination with Royalty. We got up early to watch the Funeral of the Late Duke of Edinburg and I loved the pictures coming out of the Euro semi-final Football match between England and Denmark and seeing the polite jabbing of Prince William and Prince Fredrick of Denmark.

And I think I have watched most Royal weddings since 1981. I have had people quote Archbishop Michael Curry's sermon from the wedding of Harry and Megan. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be part of a royal family? What it would be like to be Royalty?

In today's first reading and gospel lesson, we get a glimpse into the lives of two royal families. Neither has a happy, fairy tale ending. Women are seen as no more than chattel, and there are hints of incest and abuse. Both may leave us wondering what it might really mean to be part of a royal family.

The first couple, in our first lesson, is King David and Michal, his wife, who was the daughter of King Saul. If we know the backstory of Michal and David, then we know that there is a line in this lesson that really sticks out. It's when Michal looks out the window and sees David dancing before the Lord and we read, "and she despised him in her heart." The line should break our hearts a little because this is not the happy story that their romantic beginnings pointed towards.

Michal was the second daughter of King Saul. Saul had vowed that whoever killed Goliath would obtain his first daughter (Merab) in marriage. But when David kills Goliath, Saul is jealous of David and reneges on his vow and marries Merab to someone else.

Turns out that's good news for Michal, because, as scripture tells us, "Michal loved David." When her father Saul finds this out, he decides to use this to his advantage in his hostility toward David. He tells David he can have Michal as his wife – he can marry into the royal family – if David kills one hundred Philistines. Saul is certain David will end up the victim (what are the chances of surviving 100 killings!), but David actually kills two hundred. He gets to marry Michal.

Michal loved David. Saul sends his soldiers to kill David, but Michal protects him. She lowers David out the window, then dresses up an idol like David, complete with his clothes and a goat-hair wig, puts it in bed, and pulls the covers over it. Saul's soldiers burst into the room, pull back the covers, and—no David.

With David on the run (and we are never told whether or not he tried to get in touch with Michal), Saul gives Michal in marriage to Palti. And in the meantime, David also takes a couple more wives.

Michal loved David. But we never hear that David loved Michal.

Eventually, David becomes king and demands Michal back. Maybe it was love after all. Or maybe he was just getting back what he thought belonged to him.

We aren't told when exactly Michal stopped loving David. Maybe it was when he took her back from her husband Palti when he begged him not to. Maybe it was when she met the other wives he had married in the meantime. What we do know is that day, watching David dance for the Lord with joyful abandon, she sees David and she hates him.

After the dancing, David throws a dinner for all the people, and then, in the section after our reading ends, David goes back to his home. Michal meets him out front and tells him he's made a fool of himself, dancing like that, so un-kinglike. David says, basically, "Well, I was dancing for the Lord, the one who made me king instead of your father, and I'm going to do a lot more embarrassing and debasing things than this."

David was a great king, but a great husband? Michal might say not. No "happily ever after" here.

Then in our Gospel reading, King Herod, has other troubles in the marriage and family department. He has divorced his first wife and married Herodias, his brother-in-law's wife. Since his brother-in-law was still alive at the time, this was against Jewish law, and John the Baptist calls him on it. Herod is supposed to be keeping Jewish law, not defying it. But neither Herod nor Herodias like John the Baptist criticizing their marriage in public, so John the Baptist is sent to rot in jail.

That is until King Herod throws himself a birthday party and makes a promise that is supposed to make him seem like a great man, a stupendous, powerful man. He promises to give his stepdaughter whatever she asks because her dancing has pleased him so much. The daughter checks with her mother Herodias and Herodias sees her chance. A chance not to change her husband's mind about John the Baptist, nor a chance to practice good conflict resolution skills and see if they can come to some compromise about John, but rather to get rid of this meddlesome prophet once and for all. And big bold man Herod doesn't have the guts to say no, to go back on his word in front of his guests. Herodias tells her dancing daughter to ask for the most repulsive possible dish at a dinner party—John the Baptizer's head on a platter. So, check out these royal family values: Herodias is willing to use her daughter to get the horrific thing she wants. Herod would rather be taken for a murderer than a fool. And the daughter doesn't seem to have the moral sense to recognize she's being used to commit a horrific tragedy.

So much for fairytales. Or perhaps they're nightmares!

Our own families may not include utter hatred or gatherings that descend into murder, but we've all had our experiences of people who are supposed to be partners becoming enemies, of people using one another, people feeling discarded, or being manipulated. As I watched the latest Royal Wedding I had a phone conversation with a family member, who after 19 years of marriage could not take the mental abuse any longer and had decided to separate from her husband. And, unfortunately she wasn't able to finally make the move. We know deep in our bones that this ugliness isn't what families are for.

What happens next in Mark's gospel, right after today's lesson, right after Herod's horrible feast, is that Jesus throws a dinner party. Another Royal Feast with a royal family gathered. It's the Feeding of the More than Five Thousand, and it's completely different from Herod's feast. There's no guarded palace, just a beautiful open field where all are welcome. There's no head table; everyone is a guest of honor. There's no boasting, just thanksgiving. There's no pompous vow-making and self-promotion, just simple food, blessed, broken, and shared, and enough for all. No horrible silver platter of death, just twelve baskets full to the brimming with abundant life-giving bread and fish. A royal family created by the people of God.

At which family table would you rather dine? I know my choice. We gather weekly around the faith family table as it is prepared for us. A table of acceptance, grace and mercy. A table free of judgement and debasement. A table where the dancer, the forsaken, the forgotten, the innocent, the abused, the envied, the loved and the schemer are all welcomed. The host, of heaven and earth, awaits with open arms for us to answer the invitation and acceptance. The choice is ours. Amen.