

Sermon Notes from Sunday, July 11, 2021
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- Death of John the Baptist
 - Not the most pleasant part of Mark's Gospel
 - Pretty gruesome, actually.
 - Serves as foreshadowing for what's to come
 - Some commentators say this is when Jesus' ministry gets serious.
 - For the first time, we see the consequences of his message and way of repentance and truth.
 - But, what we also see here is a bigger picture lesson here about power and leadership.
 - And the very different approaches to those that we encounter in Herod/Rome and in Jesus/God.
- First, Herod.
 - He is called "king" in the New Testament, but he wasn't actually a king.
 - He was one of 3 sons who inherited a divvied-up kingdom from their father, Herod the Great.
 - They were a "client kingdom" of Rome, meaning they paid tribute to the Roman emperor and owed him allegiance.
 - When Herod the Great died with this crazy inheritance plan in his will, the emperor approved it.
 - And so, the older brother Archelaus received the largest portion of land, including Samaria and Judea.
 - The younger half-brother Philip, mentioned in our Gospel today, ruled over the northern portion of the kingdom.
 - And this guy, Herod Antipas, inherited Galilee and a thin stretch of land called Perea, which pretty much means "middle of nowhere."
 - Which he'd only inherited because his father had had his older brothers killed for treason! Yikes!
 - So he didn't have much, but what he had was his, and he wanted to hang on to it and the power that went with it, no matter what.
 - But, at this point in time, he's got himself into a bit of a bind.
 - You see, this whole thing that John the Baptist accuses him of – marrying his brother's wife- was true.
 - He had married his brother Philip's wife.
 - But here's the real tricky part: He was already married.
 - According to other historical records, Herod had been married to Phasaelis, the daughter of his enemy to the east, King Aretas of Nabatea.

- It was a calculated political alliance, bringing about an uneasy peace between these two regions that were constantly on the brink of war.
- But for some reason, Herod decides to ditch her for his brother's wife Herodias (who is actually his niece from his other half-brother's side, the side their dad had killed...).
 - Yeah- this family's got issues.
- Anyway, when Herod Antipas and Herodias decide to divorce their current spouses and get married, they not only make an enemy of Philip, Herodias' husband, but also of King Aretas and his kingdom Nabatea!
 - When Phasaelis hears of his plan to leave her, she escapes back to her father's kingdom, opening the way for Aretas to declare all out war.
 - And then, John the Baptist gets himself involved by publicly speaking against the marriage as immoral and dangerous. So Herod locks him up!
 - It's a complicated, ugly, downright nasty situation.
- And so, what does Herod do?
 - He throws a party.
 - The Gospel tells us that he gave himself a birthday party and invited the "courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee."
 - Why does he do this?
 - He's gotta schmooze!
 - He knows that war with Nabatea is coming.
 - He needs to wine and dine the elite of Galilee so that they are ready to defend him with troops and weapons and food and support.
 - This isn't a birthday party to celebrate himself; he wants something from these people.
 - He needs something from these people.
 - He has to show them, with a lavish meal and bawdy boasting, that he is the horse they want to back in this race.
 - He wants to show them what kind of leader he is.
 - Vote for Herod, he's our man!
 - So when the fateful moment comes, after he's braggingly promised Herodias' daughter Salome that she can have whatever she wants, then he has to prove it.
 - She asks for John's head on a platter.
 - And Herod has to show his guests what kind of leader he is, to back up his boasts and swagger with actual action.
 - And so, he does.
 - He orders John to be killed.
 - He can't back down from his promise, not now, with all these important people in the room.

- He shows them, and us, exactly what kind of man he is:
 - Selfish. Power-hungry. Ready to do anything and everything necessary to keep that power and get what he wants, which is the title and rule and approval of the emperor.
- Now, our second example of leadership: Jesus.
 - I know, Jesus isn't even in this story!
 - But our Gospel story today is sandwiched between two important, well-known stories about Jesus.
 - Immediately before our Gospel reading today, we have the story of Jesus sending out his disciples two by two.
 - We're told that he "gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.'"
 - And right after John the Baptist's unfortunate end, we have another familiar story: the feeding of the 5,000.
 - Jesus gathers his disciples back together and takes them away for a little retreat.
 - Of course, that's not what happens. The people find them and flock to Jesus.
 - And instead of getting frustrated with them, he "has compassion," the Gospel says.
 - So he provides a meal for all of them, a simple communion of bread and fish for all to eat.
 - What a contrast with the smooth schmoozing of the elites that we see in Herod!
 - Jesus shows us a totally different way to lead.
 - He shares leadership, doesn't hoard it for himself.
 - He freely hands over his authority and skills, teaching the disciples how to do the work he does.
 - This is called "keychain leadership" in modern leadership studies.
 - He also teaches them to depend on others, trusting in the goodness of those they meet on the road for their needs.
 - Not in a self-promoting way like Herod, but in the way of humility and friendship.
 - And he teaches them good boundaries- if people won't receive you, shake the dust from your feet and move on.
 - Don't spend your time trying to convince them of something, trying to schmooze them...
 - Just let the Holy Spirit do its work of bringing faith.

- And then in the feeding of the 5,000 (actually about 10,000 when you count women and children), he shows another way of leading.
 - First, rest and renewal are important.
 - Second, being able to assess when your presence is needed and make the call to give of your time, despite the need for rest, trusting it will come at a later time.
 - And last, take care of your people with abundance and generosity.
- Two pictures of leadership.
 - Both real life examples in the ancient world, and ones we can see at work today.
 - Both effective... to a point.
 - Herod was eventually dethroned and banished to Spain after losing the war with Nabatea.
 - And Jesus... well, we all know what happens to him. And what happened to John.
 - The difference is that Jesus knows the cost of his leadership and his message.
 - And he still does it anyway.
 - He knows it is difficult. He knows it will create enemies.
 - But he doesn't do it for himself.
 - He doesn't do it for fame or fortune or power or ego.
 - He does it for us.
 - For me and you.
 - For rich and the poor, the powerful and the forgotten.
 - For your best friend and for that neighbor you can't stand.
 - For the schmoozers and the boozers, the politicians and lawyers, the social workers and aid providers, the saint and the sinner.
 - Jesus' way may not have been easy.
 - It might not have been "successful" in our usual definition.
 - But it showed us everything we need to know about him and God the Parent, who fights for us, feeds us, equips us, and sends us out to share his truth of love and peace.
 - Thanks be to God. Amen.