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July 11, 2021
Ordinary Time, Proper 10
Year B
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Psalm 24
Eph 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

The Banquet

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

Can we all just agree that today's gospel describes the most horrific birthday party ever? I tried to come up with a gentler, kinder introduction to this passage but there is no getting around it. The beheading of John the Baptist is the story of a cruel drunken spectacle of richness and excessiveness saturated with vengeance, pride and savagery. Herod's infamous birthday banquet was legendary in first century Jerusalem, appearing in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and recorded by the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. The decadence of the celebration and the gruesomeness of the beheading has made it a popular subject of art for centuries. This dramatic interlude in Mark's gospel, carefully sandwiched between the sending out of the apostles by Jesus to proclaim the gospel and their successful return back to him, is viewed as a sobering reminder of the cost of discipleship and an ominous foreshadowing of Jesus' own death. The tragic story of Herod's birthday feast is also, however, a story about love and self-worth. Or perhaps, more correctly, the tragic misunderstanding of what constitutes love and self-worth.

Despite how Mark refers to him in his gospel, Herod Antipas was no king. He was the son of Herod the Great, the fatherly role model who massacred every child two years and younger when Jesus was born. Herod Antipas ruled only a small portion of his deceased father's

kingdom. The “love” he was taught from childhood was the love of power and wealth. Herod loved all his privileges: the wine and women for the asking, the boastful claims to a kingdom he didn’t own, soldiers ready to do his bidding at the snap of his fingers. What this birthday feast reveals most, however, is that Herod loved to be in control. He loved to be admired. His sense of self-worth, his love of self, was intimately tied to his arrogant thirst for power and control. When his half-brother’s wife Herodias became the object of his desire, he used his power to take what he wanted. When John the Baptist had the audacity to criticize his actions, he used his power to arrest him. When he wanted his stepdaughter to dance before him, a demeaning request typically reserved to professional prostitutes, he used his power to command it. And during the birthday banquet, we see the fear of what others might say about his authority and this insatiable need to *appear* to be in control result in the murder of John the Baptist.

And what of Herodias? What does she love and where is her sense of self-worth?

Herodias is vain and vengeful. She, too, loves power and control, brutally demonstrated by the manipulation of both her daughter and her husband. She is likely jealous of the lustful attention her new husband lavishes on her daughter. She is likely a woman you would not want to meet in a dark alley. When she gains knowledge of John’s condemnation, we can just hear her cry, “How dare he?” But Herodias is also devoid of love and belonging and miserably insecure. It is shockingly absurd that the words of a poor transient Jewish boy have enraged her to the point of demanding his head on a platter. Herodias’ entire sense of self-worth is dependent on the opinion of others.

This is a horrific banquet showcasing the horrific actions of horrific people. But . . .do you see yourself in this story? The fourth century Church Father St. John Chrysostom wrote that “with all humanity we have many things in common; all partake of the same nature with us. Let us not say we have nothing in common with them.”¹ Herod and Herodias are despicable characters, yes, but don’t we all long, at some level or another, to be the one in control? Don’t we still live in a world where wealth, status, education and power are the symbols of value and worthiness? A world where we are convinced of our own opinions without considering with curiosity the opinion of others? Where, like Herod, we are afraid to admit a mistake, or if we do admit it, we couch it with excuses and explanations? We live in a culture that devalues vulnerability and applauds false bravado. Can we summon the courage of John the Baptist to speak out against injustice without being worried about how it might affect our job or our family or what others might think? Can we rely less on defensiveness and more on self-examination? Are we willing to let go of the stubborn pride or jealousy or fear that gets in the way of meaningful authentic relationship?

There is another feast, a different celebration we are invited to. A banquet we humbly join despite our faults and insecurities and continual need for forgiveness. A place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our desire to be in control. A banquet that embodies true love and celebrates true self-worth. A party where we are all equally welcome, all equally valued, regardless of earthly accolades of wealth or status or power. And it is right here. At this table. The Lord’s Supper, the Holy Eucharist, the foretaste, the sampling, of our heavenly banquet. The feast that we, the adopted children of God

¹ <http://catenable.com/com/5838fee5205c248f42e52d68>

through Christ, have been invited to attend, as St. Paul states, “before the foundation of the world.”² The banquet where we revel in the richness and excessiveness of God’s grace lavished upon us, saturated with love, mercy and forgiveness. The party where we open the indescribable gift of Jesus’ sacrifice and then pass on this gift of grace that has been given to us. Come, come to THIS banquet. Bravely lay at the altar all your pride and fears, jealousies and worries, arrogance and insecurities. This, this is where you belong. Amen.

² Eph 1:4