

HE WISHED HE COULD TAKE THAT ONE BACK

Mark 6:14-29

It's shocking how much people can discover about you these days. There's almost no such thing as a private life anymore. The internet has nearly eliminated that possibility. If you're willing to spend a few bucks, you can track down almost anybody and learn where they live, their place of employment, their marital status and credit rating, what books they read, magazines they subscribe to, websites they visit, educational level, political affiliation, and criminal record. Add to that the willingness of many to describe and display themselves on Facebook, InstaGram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat, et al, and in the 21st century privacy has become less and less an option for most of us.

Yet, even without radio, newspapers, TV, and the Internet, Jesus had no private life either. One time he lamented, *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have trees; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* The demands upon Jesus had become so great, he could not get free to rest. Word of Jesus spread rapidly throughout Galilee even in the 1st century.

Our passage begins, "King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known..." Herod heard of what? Jesus sending his disciples two-by-two to the villages of Galilee to call people to repent. Repent from what? Repent FROM following the fading kingdoms of Rome and Herod – marked by pride, jealousy, cruelty and death. And repent TO the kingdom of God under the authority of Jesus – marked by courageous faith, humility, and grace.

Jesus created a stir. He drew crowds. He healed the sick and the lame. He welcomed outcasts. And he insisted upon repentance, a reordering of one's thinking about God and one's manner of life. He sounded and behaved very much like one of Israel's prophets, like Elijah. Many thought he could be Elijah returned to usher in the Messianic age. Herod had a different idea. He insisted, "*John, (the Baptist) whom I beheaded, has been raised.*" That would explain Jesus' remarkable powers. John had not performed powerful healings. Yet, if he'd returned from death, anything was possible. Something new and dramatic was happening in Jesus. It sent a chill down Herod's spine.

Imagine how you'd feel, if someone on whom you'd committed a grave injustice return to your life and community - particularly, if you'd assumed he was dead.

Herod and John the Baptist had a complicated relationship to say the least. Mark observes that Herod liked to listen to John preach. "*When Herod heard John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.*" I had an acquaintance in Lake Erie Presbytery with whom I disagreed on almost every issue before the church. But he always made me think and rethink my positions. I listened carefully to him. Herod liked to listen to John, even though John perplexed him. Even so, Mark notes, "*Herod himself sent men who arrested John, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother's, Philip's, wife, because John had married her.*"

So, what was the problem with their marriage? Herod and Herodias met around 29 AD, when Herod visited Philip on his way to Rome. They had a quick affair. She agreed to leave Philip and marry John, if he would divorce his wife.

He did. Herodias, then divorced Philip and married John. She initiated the divorce with her husband. So what? Not only did she fool with Herod while still married to Philip, but in Jewish law women did not have right to divorce their husbands. In John's eyes she doubled down on her sin. He publically disparaged her for it, and she, understandably took great offense at his publicly casting aspersions over her morality. That was the problem with the marriage.

Herodias carried her grudge heavily and wanted Herod to kill John, but he would not because, as Mark notes, *“Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.”* Herod jailed John to quiet him, and assuage Herodias, but he would not kill John.

Life went on that way, until...THE PARTY. When Herod should have bit his tongue, he stuck his foot in his mouth instead. His birthday rolled around and he threw a party for himself. First century Jews generally didn't celebrate birthdays, but the Romans did. John was an aficionado of all thing Roman and he decided to party hardy. Herod's parties were legendary for their excesses. Wine flowed freely. Loosened up and lusty, Herod went gaga for his stepdaughter (a serious no-no). After she charmed his guests with her dancing, he offered her anything she wanted as a reward. It was a vain gesture designed to impress his guests. The “Law of Unintended Consequences” kicked in. Herodias seized the moment and directed her daughter to ask for John's head. Herod was stuck. He pulled his foot from his mouth and chose expedience over integrity. John was beheaded.

Is there a moral to this story? Is there a message here for us? Yes. There is the obvious moral: Look before you leap. Watch out for the Law of Unintended Consequences. Remember famous last words like “I need some ground cover for erosion control. I’m gonna import some of that Kudzu from Asia to plant on my property.” Or “I feel fine. I can handle another drink before driving home.” The moral is “Sin in haste and repent at leisure.”

There are also two less obvious but more important points. **First, this story fits Mark’s overall theme**, which is Jesus’ mission of calling for repentance and presenting the good news of God’s intervening kingdom. Just prior to today’s passage, Jesus sends the Twelve out with his authority to preach and heal. Many folks responded. John the Baptist had a similar message of repentance. Herod listened to John with considerable interest. It wasn’t enough. He needed to respond, to repent. But he would not decide and act, then he became someone else’s pawn and killed the man he tried to protect.

One can be a fan of Jesus but not a disciple. One can enjoy what he had to say, to marvel at the beauty of his ethic, and shake his/her head in approval. One can be awestruck by the healings he performed. One can even read the Bible and pray without living as Jesus’ committed follower.

God patiently gives time to respond wholeheartedly to the gospel. Such a response is to love God completely and love others by seeking their best interest. The longer one delays responding, the more there for him/her to repent. The more one hears without intentionally responding, the easier it is to fool oneself.

Second, just after this story of Herod's party, **Mark tells of another party** - Jesus feeding the five thousand from five loaves and two fish. Jesus offers a different kind of party. Things go much better at Jesus' party than anyone had a right to expect.

The question Mark asks with this juxtaposition is: **Whose party will you attend?** Which king will you follow? King Herod or King Jesus? If you go to Herod's party, you'll get wine and dancing girls. You'll hobnob with the rich and powerful. If you go to Jesus' party you'll get fish and chips. You'll rub shoulders with powerless and poor folks. That's true enough. Jesus threw a party for the poor and outcast out of compassion. Herod threw a party in honor of himself. This is the choice that John the Baptist and then Jesus asked people to make. Will you choose the way of power, prestige, and exclusivity, the party of Herod or the way of fairness, compassion, and humility, the party of Jesus? You cannot attend both parties.

Mark makes it clear what is expected of people who choose Jesus' party. They are expected to join in announcing and inaugurating God's kingdom. They may have to experience difficulties because of doing so. The original Twelve did. But it is worth it, because the story of John, and Herod's garbled thinking and stupid words, point toward another greater story yet to come. Herod is wrong, but not completely. In Jesus God's resurrection power is at work. Not in John the Baptist returned from the dead, but because Jesus is the one through whom death will be overcome. All that Jesus was doing in his ministry reaches its climax in his crucifixion. Like John, he must suffer a cruel and unjust death. But unlike John, he is

resurrected from death. He promises the same will be true for us.

Fortunately for us we know the rest of the story. Jesus' party is just getting started. Everyone is invited. His party goes on forever. The sooner one accepts his invitation and joins his party, however, the better it is.

Sources:

1. Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, p. 71-73.
2. Ronald Kernaghan, *Mark*, IVP, p 121-124.
3. HOMILETICS ONLINE, 7/15/18.