

July 12

When People Lose Their Heads Mark 6:14-29

My basketball team was ahead late in game but our opponents were on a run. Coach called time out to set up some plays and the last thing he said to us was “no fouls; we don’t want the clock to stop!” Our next time out came after I fouled their best shooter. My explanation when I got to the sideline was something like, *Sorry coach, I lost my head.* Coach said, *It’s over there on the bench... go find it.*

Paul Simon said there are *50 ways to lose your lover.* There are at least that many ways to lose your head. Metaphorically, you can lose your head in Argentina or by trying to sell a senate seat or by running ponzi schemes. You can lose your head when you’re under enemy fire or at the black jack table or in the bar. You can lose your head from fame or from watching 24 hour coverage of fame. There must be at least 50 ways and places to lose your head.

Our gospel text today is about John the Baptist losing his head in the literal sense which was the culmination of several others who lost theirs in the metaphorical sense, starting with Herod the Great. Herod was a prolific builder with a paranoid brain. His crazy family came by it genetically.

They say that if you’re looking for a wife in WV or Arkansas, you probably go to a family reunion. I’ve heard that one of the great theological debates in both these states is, if a man and woman are married in this life, when they get to heaven will they still be first cousins?

But none of those myths measure up to the strange marriages in the family of Herod. I would direct you to the chart in your bulletin so you can better understand the wedding web.

Herod the Great was married to five different women; I’ve listed only four for our purpose here. This is why he was called Herod the Grrreeaaat! By his wife **Mariamne** the Hasmonean, he bore a son **Aristobulus**. Herod lost his head and murdered Aristobulus. But before he was murdered by his father, Aristobulus had a daughter named **Herodias**. That name is familiar because we heard it in our reading today. Herodias was the wife of Herod who lost her head and wanted John the Baptist dead.

Herod had another son by another wife named **Mariamne** and named him **Herod Philip**. Herod Philip did not receive any commission to rule from his father, so he became a wealthy civilian and businessman in Rome. Herod Philip lost his head and married Herodias, who was his half brother’s daughter or his half-niece. They had a daughter named **Salome** who is the dancer in the story we read.

Another son of Herod the Great, **Herod Antipas**, was the Herod who ruled Galilee. Are there enough Herod’s for you? Herod Antipas went to visit his brother in Rome and lost his head. He seduced his sister in law, Herodias, and took her back to Palestine. Salome, the daughter, went with her mother who became the wife of the Herod in our story. So Herodias had two husbands named Herod who were step brothers. Her name means *I like guys named Herod.*

Herod Antipas, who had lost his head with Herodias, broke Jewish law by committing adultery with and then marrying his brother’s wife. John the Baptist called him to account for this in a time when speaking truth to power was your curtain call. Herod would not harm John, however, because he thought John was a true prophet. Also, Herod was in fact guilty of what John said. And John the Baptist was not a threat to Herod.

He was a threat to Herodias, however, which may be why she lost her head. If John’s message got through to Herod’s conscience, if Herod actually repented, it could be bad for Herodias. She had no social security. She couldn’t go back to Herod Philip. There was not

another Herod to marry. She thought John was insolent to speak about her husband and about her in such a way. She became bitter and hated John and wanted him silenced for all time.

On Herod's birthday, his step-daughter Salome danced for him. I think this is one of those stories we should not imagine in too much detail, at least in a PG setting. Salome wasn't doing ballet. Clearly, Herod once again lost his head over a female. It happens too often between men and their step-daughters.

Herod was so enamored with Salome, he told her she could have anything she wanted up to half his kingdom. Salome was overwhelmed by the offer and asked her mother what she should request. Herodias saw her opportunity and told the daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist.

I'm shocked that Salome went along with it. My kid wins a raffle and I say, *take the luggage, we need luggage. I don't want luggage*, he says. *I want the pogo stick. How about we get the vegetarian pizza*, I say. *We want pepperoni*, they say.

Mark doesn't report it, but I know Salome said, *I don't want the head of John the Baptist. I want my own servants--good looking 18 year olds. Or maybe I should take half the kingdom.* Well I don't know why she didn't ask for half of the kingdom that included the jail where John was imprisoned. She must have been pretty young. And mothers on a mission often get their way.

We have here a study in contrasts. John kept his head until the end. The Herods kept losing theirs. It's a contrast of heat and light. The Herods produced lots of heat. John's life was about the light.

- **John kept his head in austerity while the Herods lost theirs in prosperity.** We may desire and achieve wealth, but look at what wealth and status often does to people. The tabloids and paparazzi will always be in business because wealth and power cause personal trainwrecks. Wealth and power produce heat but no light. By contrast, **Mother Teresa, Lottie Moon, St. Francis, Millard Fuller** turned from the allure and developed the capacity for mental and spiritual equilibrium. Their lives gave off light.
- **John kept his head calling people back to God. The Herods lost theirs by using people to get what they wanted.** Osama bin Laden wants to hurt the US. He uses others as human bombs to achieve his ends. It's usually not so obvious, however. Are we helping the poor by giving them low paying jobs or are we using them to increase our profit margin? John understood that people belong to God and are called for God's use.
- **John kept his head and many disciples followed and loved him. The Herods had only subjects who had not real choice but to serve their royal masters.** No one had to be a disciple of John. They came to him because he spoke truth and lived truth about God. John never had to worry or wonder if those around him wanted to be there. The curse of money and power is that you never know that you're loved for who you are rather than what you have or what status you've achieved. *Does she want to marry me because of me or my money? Is he interested in me because I'm successful in business?* You can lose your head when you're never really sure who your friends are and who really loves you

- **John kept his head in the light of God. Herod lost his in the heat of passion. Herodias lost hers in the heat of fear.** If you want to see heat on display, watch the senate hearings this week, or any hearing for that matter. Watch each public servant get on their soapbox to leverage their constituents or play to their party. Heat, not light. Most media is the same: heat not light. The stories that get viewers are the sensational, not the substantial.

**Our text today shows us the contrast of kingdoms.** John came to announce and Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom of light and truth. It is a kingdom of justice and peace. It is a kingdom of love and mercy. All other kingdoms resemble the Herod family. They are ruled by the heat of jealousy, passion, anger, fear and greed that is the result of people losing their heads.

A wealthy couple in Florida who became foster parents of 16 developmentally challenged kids were killed in their home over the weekend. The children were asleep and unharmed. Here was a couple who could have lived for their own pleasure but instead decided to bring light into the lives of kids who were very much at risk. And we wonder why such things happen to those who make our world better. John's disciples must have struggled with the same question.

Jesus said of John the Baptist, *there has never been a greater man born of woman than John...* a servant who kept his head until the end. Let there be that same light in us, O God!