

S. H. & T. M.  
Dunlap

## A GRUESOME BIRTHDAY PARTY

Mark 6.14-29

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A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 16, 2000.

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The fame of Jesus spread like wildfire. Word of exorcisms and healings made their way south to Jerusalem, all the way to King Herod's palace. Various explanations were put forth to explain the strange tales reported. The explanations came right out of the *X-Files* which deal with unexplained, paranormal activity. Some people said, "Elijah has come back." Elijah was an Old Testament prophet who lived 800 years before Jesus. He challenged the wicked Israelite king Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel like John the Baptist challenged Herod and Herodias. King Herod, however, offered another equally bizarre explanation. "John the Baptist is back."

Strange thing is John the Baptist was dead. Herod arrested John the Baptist for condemning his adultery. Herod had rejected his first wife for Herodias, his brother's wife. "Adultery!" cried John. John ranted like some right wing fundamentalist. Only John wasn't protected by the Constitution and freedom of speech. So Herod arrested John; threw him into a cold, dark dungeon infested with rats; fed him on bread and water.

One day Herod threw a birthday party for himself. He invited all the important men in Galilee. It was a stag party. Lot's of beer. After polishing off several kegs, Herod clapped his hands and called for his teenage daughter. "Dance for us!" And dance she did. The band struck up "The Stripper." The old men hooted, clapped and laughed. Boy, could she dance. The men loved it. Effusive with alcohol, Herod rewarded her performance by offering her anything she wanted.

She excused herself to consult her mother. Herodias had always wanted to kill John for publicly condemning her but Herod "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy

man." Herod liked to listen to John but never could bring himself to take the leap of repentance. Now was her chance to get her wish. She told her daughter, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." Herod didn't want to kill John but he felt the <sup>pressure of a prince</sup> pressure of losing face before his guests. We all know something about giving in to pressure. Did you ever cheated on a test because you were under pressure to get good grades? Were you ever pressured into making fun of an unpopular coworker? Have you ever succumbed to your spouses pressure to do something unethical? Politicians, especially, are under pressure to please special interests. This election year, listen carefully to what candidates are saying. Who or what will they unjustly sacrifice to please various interest groups? Whose head will be served on a platter to serve what lobby?

Herod couldn't resist the pressure to please so he had John executed. You can see the waiter dressed in a starched white serving jacket come through the door with the platter held high, balanced on his right hand with the head of John the Baptist on it. See drunken Herod ghoulishly holding up John's head by the hair amidst laughter and cheers. John's eyes are still open – staring at Herod. John's eyes haunt Herod. When Herod heard about somebody up in Galilee healing and casting out demons he was sure John the Baptist had come back for him.

John lost his life because he meddled in Herod's personal life. It's one thing to be against sin. It's another thing to preach against sin in particular people. None of us likes being confronted with our sins -- especially publicly. Some people stay away from church because Christians have the reputation of being judgmental. I ran into a woman who stopped coming to church because she was in a Sunday School class where the opinion was expressed that it's a sin for people who aren't married to live together. At the time, like Herodias, she was living with a man who wasn't her husband. I wasn't present in the class so I don't know exactly what was said or how it was said. But she took offense. She felt her living arrangements were a private

matter. Nothing drives people away from the church like judgmentalism. John the Baptist comes across as being judgmental -- publicly condemning Herod and Herodias for their adultery.

Now let me tell you up front, I'm no John the Baptist. I'm Ted the Presbyterian, not John the Baptist. I'm very reluctant to call anyone a sinner even though I believe we're all sinners. I'm very reluctant to single out somebody's sin in public. The few times I've done it, I've regretted it -- not because *I* suffered in anyway, but because I caused pain and embarrassment. If someone were privately to say, "I'm thinking about leaving my wife and moving in with another women. How do you feel about that?" Most likely I'd say what I was taught in seminary to say, "How do *you* feel? Do *you* believe it's right?" Often the person asks because they already feel guilty. I'd ask, "If you believe it's wrong, what are you going to do about it and how can I and the church help you do what's right?" That's how I'd approach someone like Herod and Herodias. I certainly wouldn't condemn them as John the Baptist did.

The reason is, I know I'm a sinner. Who am I to condemn sin in another until I'm free of sin in my own life. Jesus said, "He who is without sin, cast the first stone." Secondly, I've come to realize that nobody sins in isolation -- there's always a history. Someone has said that to know all is to forgive all. I'm not sure that's always true, but my judgmentalism has often been tempered when I hear both sides of a story.

I do believe, however, as did John the Baptist, that it's serious sin to leave your spouse in the lurch for another like Herod and Herodias did. Adultery is a serious sin and every sin carries consequences. God created us in such a way that when we go against God's law, we go against the grain of the universe and we get splinters. Yes, there's always forgiveness. There's always grace. But we still reap what we sow. We still have to live the rest of our lives with the bitter

consequences of our sinful, self-destructive choices and a lot of innocent people suffer as a result.

We do need to be confronted when we sin as John the Baptist knew. But how? When I sin, how do I want you, my fellow flawed Christians to deal with me? Do I want you to ignore my sin? Do I want you to excuse my sins? Do I want you to redefine my sin so that what I've done becomes something less than sin? No – but neither do I want you to publicly embarrass me - although public embarrassment is sometimes unavoidable. If you publicly confront me about my sin I'm likely to dig in my heels and resist repentance. I'm more likely to recognize and take responsibility for my sin if you allow me to discover and name the sin myself.

Above all, when I sin, I want you to love and accept me even when you know the worst about me. If you hold me accountable for my sinful actions I need you to support me in my struggle to overcome my sin. I need you to stick with me when I fail to repent and backslide. Above all, I want and need the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without the promise his grace, I'll probably deny my sin or excuse it or redefine it or get angry at you for judging me like Herodias got angry with John the Baptist.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is offered to us in the gospel. The gospel tells us that Jesus calls sinner to a banquet – just as King Herod called people to his banquet. Sinners who come to his banquet are forgiven and strengthened to do God's will by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not only the host, but also the menu, at the banquet he invites us to. "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me shall never hunger. Whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Whoever comes to me I will in no wise cast out. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them and eat with them and they with me."