

How a Birthday Party Became a Murder Scene

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 10, 1994. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29.

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

Today, we come to one of the most sensational passages in the New Testament. It reads like the headlines of the O.J. Simpson related murders. It's the story of the gruesome beheading of John the Baptist and the events leading up to that murder.

King Herod heard about the fame of Jesus. He was forced to find some explanation for Jesus. "Who is he? Is he someone who will threaten my power and, therefore, someone I need to fear or eliminate? Is he someone I might possibly be able to use to solidify my own power? Who is this Jesus?" The same thing happens today when news of what Jesus is doing through his disciples comes to the attention of secular leaders. Secular leaders try to fit the work of the Risen Christ carried on through his disciples into some familiar frame of reference.

So Herod listened to what people were saying about Jesus. Some were saying John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. Like John the Baptist, the call to repent was a key-note of the preaching of Jesus. The message of Jesus is good news of God's unconditional grace, love and mercy. But that message demands a response. Jesus calls us to repent. He calls us to repent, not because if we don't we'll go to hell, but because the Risen Christ enables us to repent. The unconditional love, grace and mercy frees us to repent and to turn, wholeheartedly to God in Christ. So it was the message of repentance that led some people to

believe that Jesus was really John the Baptist returned from the dead.

Herod also considered what others were saying about Jesus. Some said, "Jesus is Elijah." Elijah prophesied in the days of two of Israel's most wicked rulers, King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Elijah fearlessly confronted the their sins and Jezebel sought to kill Elijah. So - Herod thinks - "Is Jesus another Elijah who will bring me and my wife to harm?"

Herod listened to still others who were saying, "Jesus is a prophet, like one of the prophets long ago." Jesus is a throw back to the good old days. Jesus is like one of the strange people that we see every once in a while today, who dress up like an ancient prophet and draws crowds for whom religion is a nostalgic throw back to the good old days.

People still try to fit Jesus into familiar categories today. But the church, throughout the ages, has steadfastly refused to put Jesus in a category with anyone else. Jesus is utterly unique. Jesus is none other than the Creator of the Universe who has taken upon himself human nature and gone to hell for us and with us.

So Herod listened to all the things that people were saying about Jesus and became convinced, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead." Herod recognized that, even though he had not brought down the sword on John's head, he was, nevertheless, responsible for his death. Secular rulers in every age bear an awesome responsibility: they have the power of life and death - whether to send young men and women into battle where they might be killed - or to simply

turn the other way in the face of oppression and violence against the innocent. Herod, out of fear and guilt, believed that Jesus was really John the Baptist returned from the dead.

Herod remembered how he had given orders to have John arrested, bound, and imprisoned because of Herodias. Herod had committed adultery by first seducing and then marrying Herodias, his half-brother's wife. John directly confronted Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

When I was in seminary, we were taught that we shouldn't confront people directly like that. We should, rather, invite Herod out for lunch and say something like, "How do you feel about your relationship to Herodias?" Most people don't mind it when preachers give that kind of counsel.

But John the Baptist directly confronted Herod about his adultery. John could have done it differently. Why not preach against adultery abstractly and in generalities? That's the safest way to preach. John could have preached a sermon something like this. "Today, Herod, I'm going to preach on the seventh commandment, Thou shalt not commit adultery. Now let me explain what adultery is. Let me give you a few biblical examples of adultery. Let me explain the harmful effects of adultery on the guilty parties and on the innocent parties. Let me show you how adultery affects the children. Let me give you some examples of how adultery affects society in general. In conclusion, adultery is not God's will."

But John looked into the eyes of Herod and said directly, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." It's dangerous to preach that way. Not only

is it dangerous, it smacks of the most terrible of all twentieth century sins - self-righteousness, intolerance, and judgmentalism. And yet, God's word is not a lecture on ethics. God's Word addresses us as an individual in our sin, calling us to repent.

Because of John's preaching, Herodias, Herod's wife, nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was unable to do so because Herod feared John. Herod actually protected John knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled - there were a lot of things he didn't understand, yet he liked to listen to this fearless preacher of God's righteousness.

Now Herodias was a proud, wealthy, and willful person, used to having things her way. She nursed her grudge against John until it turned into a plan to force Herod to do what he knew to be wrong. At his birthday party, he was surrounded by high officials and military commanders and the leading people of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

Unlike most teenagers, the girl didn't know how to respond to her step father's promise. She consulted with her mother. "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. Without blinking an eye, the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John

the Baptist on a platter.”

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

Do you know what it's like to feel pressure from someone to do according to their demands? Sometimes, through the manipulation of power and threats and ridicule a person tries to get us to do what we know is wrong. Herod lived under that kind of pressure. Like we so often do, Herod caved in under the pressure. Herod beheaded John.

So when Herod heard about the fame of Jesus he immediately feared that John the Baptist had returned from the dead. There are few things that frighten powerful people more than the thought that death doesn't have the last word. Powerful rulers, dictators, totalitarian governments depend upon the terror of death to stay in power. They use fear, terror, and threats of death to secure their own power. They use torture and execution to frighten people and keep them in line.

But what if a man or woman has no fear of death? What if threats of death can't force a man or woman to do what's wrong? Those who know God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus need not fear death. We know that death doesn't have the final word. We know that the Herod's and the Herodias's of this

world don't have the final word. We're confident that nothing can separate us from God's love in and through Christ.

Then why aren't we all more like John the Baptist? Why don't we speak more boldly for Jesus Christ and his righteousness? Every Sunday morning we gather to rejoice in the victory of Jesus over death. John the Baptist was beheaded but the word he preached continues. We may die but Christ lives and nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ - not even death. "We are the only ones who can convince others that Christ has truly risen and that he lives in his church. Apart from us, there is no (other) proof (Alan Boesak)." May our words and deeds spread the fame of Christ throughout our congregation, throughout Oxford, throughout the world. Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty God, by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to **prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance**; Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and, following his example, **constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake**; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.