

Hillcrest Congregational UCC
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Making Choices
Mark 6:14-29

Today's scripture is a salacious soap opera. Political intrigue, manipulation, sex, affairs, incest, violence and execution, betrayal, child exploitation, and challenges to the powers that be. In this chapter 6 flashback, the writer of Mark explains why people might have thought Jesus was John. It turns out that John, who was imprisoned in chapter 1, was executed by Herod. Could John have come back to life in Jesus?

This story brings a lot of questions: Who is to blame here: Herodias the vengeful woman, Salome (who asked for the head, and then had it placed on a platter), the guard who did the beheading, or Herod? Or is it all of the above. Surely it is not John, who spoke truth to power.

Let me see if I can do this story any justice. There was a ruler named Herod the Great who, in return for not being totally destroyed, made a compact with the conquering devil the Roman Emperor-god. The Romans allowed him to become a puppet of Rome, if he divided administration of rule over God's people among his four sons who were all named for him. So we start with betrayal of God and God's people.

One of his sons had a daughter Herodias. Another of his sons married her- his own niece and they had a daughter, Salome. Another son, Herod Antipas although married, coveted Herodias. Both Herod Antipas and Herodias violated their marriage vows and began living together. Here we have violation of Jewish laws against adultery, incest, and taking a brother's wife.

Along comes John the Baptist calling the people to repent. He speaks truth to the people and among other things he tells Herod and Herodias that they are living in sin. This makes Herodias furious and she wants him killed. We have a vengeful woman.

Herod has him thrown in prison but he doesn't have him killed because what John preaches is powerful and John is very popular. Here we have a man either concerned for his soul, or concerned to not create a martyr.

On Herod's birthday there is a great big celebration. Herodias' daughter Salome, dances for Herod and his court. Herod is so overwhelmed he offers to reward her with anything she chooses- even half of his kingdom. Here we have a questionable practice of a child dancing before a crowd of men, and a man who makes a boastful offer in front of his peers, because he doesn't have a kingdom).

Salome asks her mother what she should ask for, and her mother decides to exact her revenge, she is told the head of John the Baptist. Herod orders the guard who willingly complies. Salome adds putting the head on a platter for special effect. I only wonder if this is all an occasion contrived by conspiring together beforehand, or each of them taking advantage of the other in turn.

Later, Herod starts hearing about a man named Jesus who is preaching, teaching, healing and calling people to repent. Everyone starts speculating, who is this Jesus? Could it be John returned from the dead? And that is where the story really begins- Herod may be having second thoughts about what he did to John. And later we see this same Herod sending Jesus to Pilate for execution- he isn't about to be caught in this pickle twice.

What is the point of this story in the Gospel of Mark? Some scholars say it is about subversion, politics and quelling rebellion (John before Jesus). Some about a weak ruler who wants other's approval or a woman who wants vengeance or a perfect case study for a gender critical analysis (how people are perceived differently because of gender- Herodias as vengeful and Herod as sorrowful). Some say it is a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection.

There are also lessons about sexual impropriety, a little girl who learns from the adults around her to take advantage of a situation, following some but not all of God's rules, and relationships between people. Finally, some say it is another lesson of how those who follow the Gospel way will find it difficult and perhaps deadly.

One thing that we do know is that the story is attested to by the Historian Josephus. And later Herod does get what he deserves. King Aretus of Arabia, his father in law declared war and defeated Herod and destroyed his army, and he was never able to recover.

But what can we glean from this story for us today? There is certainly no hope or joy in this story. There is only anger, vengeance, fear and death, versus the other story we heard this morning from 2 Samuel about David dancing in praise of God before the ark and the people and celebration.

What I found in this story was a lesson on making choices. We make and have made so many choices in our lives we often forget how accountable we are for all the decisions. We forget that we have determined our life circumstances and are responsible for our own happiness or lack thereof. We may try to blame others for how we feel, or the choices we have made, but in the end, we are the ones we can point to. But what we need is a way to make good decisions, and when we make poor decisions, a way to stop our selves before we go down the proverbial drain with the rest of our choices.

Let's look at the people in our story: Herod inherited his position from his father- and made the choice to become a puppet and subject the people of God to the rule of Rome. Herod and Herodias decided to violate sacred Jewish laws about relationships. They then decide to resent John not only for pointing out their sin, but their failure to live as good leaders and examples to the people.

Herodias allowed her little girl to dance for the party, not only exposing her but perhaps using her to manipulate Herod. Herod made the choice to succumb not only to the emotion her dancing evoked, but to the pressure of impressing the courtiers and leaders of Galilee. He boasts in front of them and then uses the excuse of having made a promise either to assuage his guilt or to sucker those at the party into acquiescence with his decision. He decides that his word is more important than John's life. The people at the party decide to go along. The guard decides to follow orders. Salome chooses to be corrupted by the situation and takes advantage by making it a spectacle.

Making choices is not easy. We can see how one choice led to another in this story. Someone taking action and another reaction, but also how one questionable choice in a life can lead to another even less desirable. The domino effect. But none of us are truly puppets, none of us are completely without will, we make choices, we have options sometimes, although sometimes it does not seem that the options are all that great. We have no one to blame for our choices except ourselves. We have the responsibility. We must begin by asking our selves questions.

What are my options? Which of these options are life giving and life affirming? Which will create hope and opportunity, which will eliminate future possibilities? Is someone trying to use or manipulate me in my choice? Does it give me or others an advantage while taking

advantage of others? Does it discriminate against another, use another, manipulate another, hurt another person? Is it honest? Can I live with it and sleep with it without nightmares in the future? Is it done in malice, vengeance, revenge, anger or fear? Is it impulsive rather than thoughtful or prayerful? Finally, this can all be summed up in the questions Jesus asked us to consider: is it loving of God, myself, and my neighbor, and yes even my enemy? This then is our moral compass.

Asking these questions might have kept Herod and company out of trouble, or could have put them back on track after one or two bad choices. And it could help us. But we still come back to the fact that some scholars believe that this story was placed here to remind us that being a disciple of Jesus and following the way of God is not easy, it is not only difficult, it can be deadly. In the end, the disciples of John decided to take the risk of recovering John's body, placed it in a tomb, and went to tell Jesus the news. That was more than Jesus got from his first disciples. Every day in our lives we are challenged to choose the harder right over the easier wrong. May we be learn to always be faithful in using our moral compass. Amen.