

Choices

July 15, 2012

Mark 6: 14-29

14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago." 16 But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" 17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. 21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 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." 23 And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. 25 At once 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." 26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. 29 On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Occasionally I run across a scripture that I find exceptionally difficult to write a sermon about. Such is the passage that I read this morning. It's a gruesome tale. It consist of treachery, drunkenness, selfishness, greed, sex, violence, peer pressure, power struggles, incest, religious persecution ...need I go on. But the more I thought about it, the more it reminded me of...well, of life today.

Here again, Mark has at least two story lines going at the same time. One story is about John the Baptist. Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Mark has 45 verses, and opens talking about John coming to lead the way for Jesus. In verse 9 John Baptizes Jesus and verse 14 states, **After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.** So Jesus didn't actually start his ministry until after Herod put John in prison. John the Baptist is not mentioned again until the second part of chapter 6, the section we are studying this morning. John the Baptist was a messenger from God. He told of Jesus' coming. He spoke the truth to everyone, even when he knew it could cost him his life. An in the end, that is exactly what happened, you all just heard the story.

The second story mark is telling in today lesson, is about Herod. Talk about a dysfunctional family. Let's see if I can explain it without getting you too confused. We begin with Herod the Great. He was called this because of his building projects. He was somewhat of a vassal king of Rome in Palestine. Nero was the Roman Emperor during this time. The Roman Empire obviously conquered and controlled this land, Galilee, so they granted Herod the title of king to rule and keep things in order. Herod the Great lived from 73-4 BC. He had no less than five wives by some accounts and ten by others. Herod the Great is the Herod who had all the baby boys in Jerusalem killed, trying to kill Jesus. To make thing really confusing, everyone is named Herod. Wife number four, whose name was Mathace, gave birth to Herod Antipas. This is the Herod of today's lesson. Herod the Great's third wife, Miriamne II gave birth to Herod Phillip I. Herod the Great and Miriamne I have a son named

Aristobulus. Aristobulus and his wife have Herodias, a girl Herod. Herodias then married Herod Phillip I, Aristobulus' half-brother. So Herod Phillip actually married his half-brother's daughter, his half niece. Herod Antipas marries the daughter of an Arabian King, finally someone outside of the family. Well that didn't last long. Herodias and Herod Phillip had a child named Solome. But Herod Antipas and Herodias had eyes for each other. Herod Antipas divorced his wife the Arabian girl, and Herodias dumped Herod Phillip. Then Herod Antipas and Herodias got married. Now Solome is Herod Antipas' niece and step-daughter. Does get just a little confusing, doesn't it? With that background in place, let us take a step back and look at the text again. John the Baptist shows up again in the Gospel of Mark. He is telling Herod and Herodias that they are wrong for being married. He is even able to quote Jewish law to back up his statements. Herod recognizes John as a holy man and even enjoys listening to him. He knows what John is saying about his marriage to Herodias is true. Herodias on the other hand can't stand John because of what he is saying and wants him killed. So Herod puts him in prison, actually as a way to protect him. Then comes the birthday party. Herod is a bit like his father, Herod the Great, in that he wants to be recognized as someone extremely important. So all the important people of Galilee have been invited to the party. We have all seen movies or read about the Roman parties of that era, with all the food, the wine, the entertainment. The party had probably been going on for a while, lots of food, and even more drink. We've probably had some preliminary entertainment, but it's late and time for the headliner. Salome's is sent to dance for Herod. Her dance has such an effect on Herod he promises her anything she wants even up to half of his kingdom. By law, half was all a woman was allowed to own. So Herod has made a rather exorbitant offer. Salome was a young girl, probably a girl in her mid-teens. This offer of a gift from Herod was huge, so she runs to her mother as says, what should I ask for momma? Herodias sees her one and only chance for revenge so she tells her daughter, tell him you want the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Salome does just what her mother asks. Herod is stuck. He knows this is wrong. John has done nothing wrong. Herod has John in prison for protection from Herodias. But she one-upped him. Now Herod has a choice to make. We just heard the scripture; we know what choice he made. We know it was the wrong choice. But why did he make the choice he made? Was it to save face with all his guest? Did Salome really have that great an effect on him? Did Herodias have that great of a hold on him? Was he just too drunk to realize what he was doing? Was it a combination of all these factors? We really don't know, and I guess, at this point in time, it doesn't make any difference. It's been over for several thousand years. There are some remarkable similarities between the death of John the Baptist and the upcoming death of Jesus. Here, Mark is actually preparing us for Jesus' death in a few chapters later. Consider, both Herod and Pontus Pilate would have preferred to not kill John the Baptist or Jesus. Both wish to please the crowd, both are manipulated to kill by a third party, both somehow become unwilling actors in a drama beyond their control. Disciples come to take away the bodies of their leaders to place them in a tomb. Both Herod and Pontus Pilot made choices that have affected the human race.

This is again where Mark has us looking in the mirror. We can look at Herod and recognize that he made the wrong choice when he had John the Baptist beheaded. But can we look in the mirror and recognize the bad choices we make. Look at some of the choices we make day to day. And they can be simple choices. How about the TV shows we watch each night. On July 3rd Andy Griffith passed away. Immediately everyone in the United States began to talk about the Andy Griffith Show. It has been heralded as one of the greatest TV shows of all times. One of the things people applaud the show for was the high moral fiber of the show. There was no sex, no violence, no drugs, the use of alcohol was portrayed through the character of Otis, the town drunk and showed comically, what alcohol abuse can do. For all his bumbling missteps, Andy never cussed Barney out. Andy lived with and took care of his old maid aunt, Aunt Bea. There was always a moral lesson to the show, whether it was Andy's son Opie being taught a lesson on friendship, or Goober the mechanic, or Floyd the

barber, or Earnest T Bass, or one of the many cast of characters, someone was always taught a moral lesson. Occasionally there was a bad guy on the show that actually required sheriff Taylor to use some of his law enforcement training and allowed Deputy Fife get his bullet out of his pocket. Even then, the offender wasn't violent; no blood, no gore, no mayhem. He was some sort of flim-flam man or something of that nature. Those shows aren't on TV any more. Everything is different. Prime Time...8:00 to 11:00. You want high ratings so you can stay on the air...you need sex, violence, trickery, greed, immorality, drugs, the list of bad things goes on and on. Why is that all that's on TV? Because we want it. We each make the choice to watch these shows. I'm just as guilty as anyone. One of my favorite shows is Person of Interest, death and violence, supposedly for the good of mankind. But we watch the shows, the ratings go up, we get more sex, violence, etc. I wonder what would happen if everyone stopped watching TV shows that weren't morality based. Don't get me wrong, I'm not on a crusade against TV this morning. I'm just using that as an example of how our choices effect us and everyone around us. As humans we are required to make choices daily. Some of them have no real consequence; am I going to wear a yellow shirt or a white shirt today. Others can have a major consequence; am I going to drive on the right side of the road or am I going to drive on the left side? If I make the wrong choice on that one, it could get real ugly. How about your future, what kind of choices are you making there? I'm not talking about your investment accounts or your retirement accounts. I am talking about your real future, your eternal future. The everyday choices you make today are affecting that eternal future. If you say that you're Ok, that you've chosen Jesus Christ, that comes with an entirely different set of choices you have to make. To say I have chosen Jesus means I have chosen a life of discipleship. It means you have made a choice not just to listen to the messages Christ taught, but that you have made the choice to follow his teachings. It means you are going to practice, actually live the path Christ has asked you to live. We are not promised that this will be easy – in fact, we ought to expect that it will involve some suffering. Sometimes we have to make the hard decisions about our way of life as followers of Jesus. Mark's gospel was written during the time when Nero was the ruler of the Roman Empire. Christians were being thrown into prison and killed every day by Nero's persecutions. He blamed the Christians for a fire that destroyed a huge portion of Rome, and it was not uncommon in the city to see Christians placed atop poles, covered in tar, and lit on fire to light the streets at night. I don't think we need to worry about that type of persecution in America today. However, if you do choose to follow Christ, your path in today's society will not be an easy one. Some of your friends will treat you differently. Some of them may not even consider you a friend at all. But we are assured, despite the suffering, that this is the right path for us to choose, and that if we do choose it, in the long run we will not regret it.

The choice is yours. You know what the right choice is, are you willing to make it?