

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Jr.
7/12/2009

“Power Corrupts”

Last week we learned that Jesus and his disciples preached a message of repentance and healed many people throughout the land. (See Mark 6:7-13) Everyone was talking about it. And the news even reached King Herod. In today’s lesson we read about how the message of Jesus was received in the halls of power.

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl,

“Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.”

²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

MEET THE HERODS

Today's lesson is all about Herod. But, it can be a bit confusing, unless you have a little background. In fact the history of the Herod family can even be a bit confusing even if you have the background. The names change without warning and the lines on their family tree crisscross.

But, let's give it a whirl.

Most of us think of Herod the Great when we think about Herod. Herod the Great was the king who had all the little baby boys in Bethlehem put to death in an effort to rid himself of a pretender to the throne, namely Jesus.

But, Herod did not limit his slaughter to those innocents. In fact Herod the Great often killed members of his own family in order to retain power. The Roman Emperor quipped that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of Herod's sons ... thus cleverly casting aspersions on the Jewish ruler and the dietary laws of his people.

I'm sure the politicians in Rome thought it was very funny. But, it wasn't so funny for those who had to live in Herod's palace. The paranoid old king was a danger to everyone.

William Barclay has a great chart in his commentary that explains the complex Herod family tree. Herod the Great married at least five women and had children by each of them.

Herodias was the daughter of one of the many sons that Herod the Great murdered. Herodias later married one of her half uncles, who managed to stay alive, a man by the name of Herod Philip.

Herod Philip and Herodias had a daughter by the name of Salome (referred to in our passage also as Herodias just to make things confusing). Actually, it might be good to think of Salome as Herodias Junior because; as we shall see she was a chip off the old block.

But, now we go back to the soap opera... I mean story.

Herod Antipas, the half-brother of Herod Philip managed to seduce his brother's wife. She left Herod Philip and married Herod Antipas. And that led to the condemnation of the king by the prophet, John the Baptist.

Are you confused yet? (By the way, speaking of confusion, for the purposes of this sermon unless I indicate otherwise when I use the name Herod, I mean Herod Antipas, the Herod who is the subject of our lesson for today.)

Anyway, if the Herods had lived today no doubt they would have been regulars on the Jerry Springer show! But, they were no laughing matter in their own day. These vain, paranoid people had real power, and that made them very dangerous.

THE WEAK HEROD

Actually, Herod Antipas did not have as much power as his father, Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled only a quarter of Judea, and more than that his rule was subject to the strict approval of the Roman authorities.

I think that's why Herod Antipas was so reluctant to take any action without seeking the approval of everyone else. He knew that one false move could cost him his position.

More than that, as we have said, Herod Antipas grew up in a very uncertain family situation, and that must have affected him personally.

Suppose you grew up in a family where you saw your paranoid father murder many family members. You would learn from a very early age to lay low and test the winds of change before making any move.

But, sometimes Herod Antipas' cautious and timid approach was overwhelmed by his unrestrained desires. We see this in his actions toward his brother's wife, and we see this in his actions toward Herodius' daughter, Salome.

I'm not sure what they were drinking at Herod Antipas' birthday party, but rest assured it was strong stuff because it was absolutely forbidden for a female family member or any respectable woman to dance before a group of men.

Hollywood has long ago exploited the more salacious aspects of this story. But, suffice it to say that Herod's intentions were far from paternal when it came to Salome.

I like to quote Lord Acton, the historian and moralist of the 19th century who wrote,

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Herod Antipas was a prime example of that maxim. Herod was weak. He was indecisive.

And he had been thoroughly corrupted by his quest to maintain power.

HEAD ON A PLATTER

And yet, there are indications in our lesson for today that, surprisingly, Herod also had a conscience.

When John the Baptist denounced Herod for his marriage to Herodias, Herod could have had John killed on the spot. That's exactly what his wife, Herodias wanted him to do.

But, Herod didn't do it. Herod was afraid of John, and in his own strange way actually liked John. Admittedly Herod was often perplexed by John's message, but Herod also liked to hear him speak.

Who knows, maybe deep down inside Herod wanted to change. And so we learn that for a time Herod actually protected John.

But, the protection of Herod was no match for the wiles of Herodias. She's sort of the New Testament's version of Jezebel. She bided her time, and when she saw the good old boys tying one on in the next room she used her own daughter as a pawn in this high stakes game of political intrigue.

Herod didn't have a chance. In what I think was a drunken stupor he (surprise, surprise) said something stupid,

"Little girl you're such a good dancer I'm going to give you whatever you ask up to half of my kingdom."

I think it's odd that he promised half his kingdom to this little dancing girl. Remember that Herod only ruled a fourth of Judea and that was at the reluctant pleasure of the Romans. One commentator said that it was like offering someone half interest in a rented car!

But, Herod didn't have to worry about Salome. Herodias was the one who was pulling the strings. And when Salome told her mom what the king had promised Herodias did not hesitate. She said,

"Ask for the head of John the Baptist."

Salome dutifully went to Herod and made the request ... adding her own little twist. She wanted the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Of course that phrase... having someone's head on a platter ... has become the classic expression of revenge from that day on. But, again we see that Herod Antipas ... at least on some level did not want to hurt John. He was deeply grieved by the request.

But, his instincts for personal and political survival were too deeply ingrained, and immediately he gave the command so that he wouldn't lose face before his subjects. He said, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And it was done.

THE GHOST OF DECISIONS PAST

In many ways this story foreshadows the coming storm. Herod acts much like Pilate. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent and tried every trick in the book to free him.

But, when push came to shove Pilate also showed that he was more worried about keeping his job than administering justice. He tried to wash his hands of the whole affair, but I suspect the death of Jesus dogged Pilate for the rest of his life.

We know that the death of John the Baptist bothered Herod. Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus not only preached and healed; he also sent his disciples out to preach and heal. The word about this powerful new preacher was out.

And people were speculating about who Jesus might be.

Some thought that he might be Elijah, the prophet who was taken directly to heaven and was thought to be the one who would return and herald the coming of the Messiah. Some thought that Jesus was bringing in a new era, that he was a prophet who could speak with authority, “Thus says the Lord ...”

And, strangely enough there was a third group. This group believed that somehow Jesus was the reincarnation of the powerful prophet who had just been murdered by Herod. They thought that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead.

When Herod heard about what Jesus and his disciples were doing, the king did not hesitate to say what he thought. We can see that his guilty conscience had not given him a day’s rest since he did what was personally and politically expedient instead of what was right.

The king said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

That wasn’t literally true of course. But, in a sense we can see how it was true for Herod. Herod would forever be condemned by his bad choices and lack of moral courage. One bad choice led to another, and every capricious and unjust action made him that much weaker.

The “ghost” of John the Baptist would haunt him for the rest of his days, and the only reason any of us remember Herod Antipas at all is because of the sorry role he played in this affair.

This is still true. How many politicians have been forced out of power because they lacked moral character? We have many modern examples. People in power can quickly lose that power and become objects of derision when their lack of moral character becomes public knowledge.

(By the way, you may be interested to know that this eventually happened to Herod Antipas. He wanted more power so he went to Rome and asked to be put in charge of all of Judea. For his insolence Caesar decreed that Herod be banished to Gaul.) No matter how much political or financial power we have; we can lose it in an instant.

REAL POWER

And yet, on the other hand people who have no political or financial power can sometimes leave a lasting legacy of hope ... if they have the moral courage to make the right decision during the time of testing.

I think this story shows us that power, real power doesn’t come from the seat of government. Real power doesn’t come from the captains of industry or the wizards of Wall Street. Quite often

those in power are corrupted absolutely. That kind of power can become addictive and destructive.

Real power comes from the content of our character. And those of us who are disciples of Jesus believe that character is built upon selfless service to others.

This was the lesson Jesus was always trying to teach by sending his disciples. But, they had a hard time learning the lesson. The disciples were fascinated with power and the trappings of power. They dreamed about being in power themselves.

One of the biggest arguments the disciples ever had among themselves concerned who would be in power when the kingdom came. James and John wanted to be on Jesus' right and left in glory.

And the other disciples got angry about this. They weren't angry with the request; they were just angry that they didn't get to Jesus first.

And Jesus once again tried to explain to them the difference between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus said that the rulers of this world are addicted to power and abuse their power. But, his disciples had a different calling. They were called to live in the manner of their Master, Jesus. Greatness in his kingdom would not be measured in kingdoms won or a consistently rising standard of living.

Greatness in His kingdom would be measured in terms of service.

That was the example of Jesus. He came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

PERPLEXED

As Herod was "perplexed" by the preaching of John the Baptist, I think that we are also sometimes are perplexed by the teaching of Jesus.

Now why was Herod perplexed by John's preaching? Was his preaching hard to understand?

I don't think so. The preaching of John was very simple and clear. You could summarize it in one sentence, "Repent, the kingdom of God is coming soon."

It's sort of like what I used to tell my children. "Which part of the no don't you understand ... the "n" or the "o." Herod didn't want to hear the n or the o. Herod was perplexed because he had a moral dilemma.

Herod knew the truth about John in his heart. Herod knew that John was a righteous man. Herod knew that John was a prophet from God. Herod even liked John's preaching. (Mark 6:20)

But, Herod simply did not want to hear the truth that John preached applied to his own personal life. My father might have put it this way, “John quit preaching and went to meddling.”

And Herod didn't like that. Herod didn't want to be personally challenged in any way. Herod wanted to hold on to power and privilege at all costs ... even if it cost him his own soul.

This is the way with many of us when it comes to Jesus. We say that Jesus is the Messiah. We say that he is the way, the truth and the life. But, when Jesus comes to us and applies that truth to our lives personally, then we are perplexed. Then we are uncertain.

Following Jesus means giving up something, and we're not so sure that we want to do that. Following Jesus means having the courage to stand up to the crowd and we're not so sure that we want to do that. Following Jesus means facing squarely our moral failures, and we're not so sure that we want to do that.

Eugene Peterson put it this way, “Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life.”

Like Herod we sometimes become perplexed. We are in that nether world between what we know to be true and what we would like to be true.

REPENT

We will not always make the right choice in life. In fact most of us make the wrong choice more often than not.

But, there is one thing that we must guard against. We cannot allow ourselves to “kill” off the truth tellers in our life. We cannot get rid of God's prophets simply because they have told us the hard truth about ourselves that we did not want to hear.

The message that John the Baptist preached, the message that Jesus preached and the message that the disciples of Jesus preached all began with the same, simple command. “Repent.”

Repentance is not a once and done experience. Repentance is a lifelong process.

Repentance is being sensitive to the fact that we could very well be going in the wrong direction. We could very well be doing exactly the opposite of what God wants us to do.

But, God's prophets and God's Son want us to know the Good News, the Gospel. We don't have to walk off the cliff of despair. We can go in a different direction. We can take God's way instead of our way. We can be saved. We can be a force for good in the world.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POWER

When God's disturbing word of repentance comes into your life, don't be like Herod. Don't be overwhelmed by the cares and concerns of this world. Don't be blinded by the lure of power and prestige. Don't kill the messenger.

Instead, take the message to heart and let that word of repentance become a word of salvation.

Try to understand that there is a different kind of power at work in this world. It is not the power that corrupts and demands so much of everyone. Instead it is the power of service and love that was demonstrated so ably by God's Son, Jesus.

Let me close this morning with one of those "and a little child shall lead them" stories. This story demonstrates the different kind of power that God often uses to change things in His world.

This past week the person of the week on ABC News was seven year old Isabelle Redford. Isabelle loves to draw, and her drawings are pretty good.

Two years ago when she was only five her mother, Kelly told this little girl about twin girls whose mother died in childbirth.

Isabelle was profoundly touched by that story ... so much so that she decided to put her artistic skills to good use. She began creating greeting cards so that she could raise money for the orphans in Haiti.

She started selling the cards at garage sales and to friends. Her sales took off and she began selling her cards through the Global Orphan Project, a charity in Kansas City that runs orphanages throughout the world.

Isabelle managed to earn over \$10,000 ... enough to actually start an orphanage in Haiti, where she visited last month. When she visited the six girls who have a new home were chanting her name as she arrived, and they had a chance to play with each other for several days.

But, one orphanage is not enough for Isabelle. She has plans to keep selling her artwork and start another home. She has already collected another \$5,000 dollars and is about to break ground on another Isabelle Redford House ... this one in Malawi, Africa.

In this little girl I see a symbol of real power. It is not political power.

It is a power born out of compassion and love and service. And it reminds us that it doesn't make any difference how young we are or how old we are.

God can use us here and now to further the kingdom.

May God give us the faith to repent and believe that good news. Amen.