

The Dance (II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Romans 7:15-25; Mark 6:14-29)

What a story! It could win a daytime Emmy for the best soap opera! In fact, today's gospel story has been a favorite topic of artists and writers for centuries. There's even a Strauss opera based on it. The story is full of sexual lust, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder.

Herodias was a woman who married her uncle, one of the sons of King Herod the Great. They had a daughter named Salome. But apparently when her husband Herod II didn't prove to be another Herod the Great, the ambitious Herodias looked elsewhere. She divorced her uncle Herod II, referred to as Philip in our gospel passage, and married his brother, another uncle of course, Herod Antipas. Now, while Jewish law at that time permitted marrying an uncle, it did not permit marrying a living husband's brother. So, God's prophet, John the Baptist, told Herod Antipas, Herodias, and everyone else that this was an abomination!

Herodias thus harbored a grudge against John the Baptist. In fact, she hated him and wanted to have him killed. So she badgered her husband until Herod Antipas finally sent men to arrest John and throw him in prison. But Herod stopped short of giving his wife everything she wanted. He refused to kill John the Baptist, in part because he was afraid of John and in part because he respected John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man. Although Herod didn't understand everything that John the Baptist said, he actually liked listening to him.

Ah, but never underestimate a determined woman, right? And so Herodias used a public occasion and her daughter's sex appeal to manipulate Herod into giving her what she wanted. At Herod Antipas' birthday celebration, Herodias had Salome do a sexy dance that so mesmerized Herod that he said, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it. Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom!" At her mother's urging, Salome answered that what she wanted was "the head of John the baptizer."

The story ends, "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her." Wow! There are all sorts of dances in this story. There's the seductive dancing of Salome, and there's the manipulative dancing of Herodias. But the saddest dance of all is

the tormented, confused, vacillating, wishy-washy, conflicted, moral dilemma, reactive dancing of Herod.

Like a ping pong ball, Herod moved in one direction, and then another, depending on whom he encountered as he danced through his life. He was reactive instead of proactive. He liked John the Baptist, and he obviously wanted some truth and goodness to guide his life. But he didn't want to stand up to his wife. He wanted to be a good leader. But he didn't want to back down on something he said in public--he had to "save face." When confronted with a moral dilemma, he didn't do what he knew was right but rather what he was socially manipulated into doing. Instead of thinking through the consequences, he just bounced wherever persons and circumstances moved him.

And Herod's not the only one we see doing this sad dance in the gospels. The people of Jesus' hometown were amazed at his wisdom, but they wouldn't commit to him, because he was just the carpenter's son. So they danced away from committing to Jesus. The Pharisees did the same. They were amazed at the words and the power of Jesus. They danced close to him, but then they remembered what closeness to him would mean to their public standing, and so they turned their backs on him. Then there was the Rich Young Ruler. He was drawn to Jesus. He wanted to follow him. As he danced close to Jesus, he said, "'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'" But when Jesus told him that he would have to give his money to the poor, the young man danced away from Jesus. He was attracted to Jesus, but not enough to sacrifice his riches. Even Pilate danced close to Jesus. He knew he was a good man, not deserving of death. But when pressured by the crowds, Pilate danced away from Jesus.¹

There were two brothers in Georgia during the 1950s. One decided that in opposition to the dominant culture of the day, he was going to help start a desegregated community. The other brother worked as an attorney for a big law firm. Both brothers were Christians and attended church regularly. When social pressure forced the desegregated community into court proceedings, the brother involved in the community asked his attorney brother to help the community with the legal work. The brother refused, however, saying that he was afraid he could lose his job. The brother

¹ Sonnanburg, Janet J., "The Dance"

involved in the community pressured his brother to help by reminding him that he was a Christian. The lawyer answered, "I will follow Jesus to his cross, but it is his cross. I have no need to be crucified." His brother said, "Then you are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple."

And what about us? Are we admirers of Jesus but not disciples? We want to dance with God, to be faithful to our covenant with God. That's why we're all here today. But when we leave here, we will return to the world, where we will be tempted to want to fit in, to keep up with those around us, to be seen as being relevant to the world in which we live. This tension is always present with us. There's the constant danger of allowing persons and circumstances to manipulate us, acting as helpless puppets, making bad choices, sacrificing the things of God for the things of the world.

As a result, do we move in one direction on Sunday, and then another direction the rest of the week, depending on whom and what we encounter as we dance through life? Do we, like Herod and Pilate, give in to the pressure of others? Do we, like the Rich Young Ruler, prefer to dance toward accumulating riches? Do we, like the people of Jesus' hometown, question whether Jesus is really someone we can place our trust in? Do we, like the Pharisees want to protect what we have and know? Do we like the lawyer in the 1950s stay with Jesus only until it costs us? Do we find ourselves going back and forth in our commitment to living as a Christian, doing the same type of tormented, confused, vacillating, wishy-washy, conflicted, moral dilemma, dance as Herod?

The Apostle Paul recognized this tendency in himself. He wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:15-24)

This past week David Brooks had a thought-provoking column. His article was about what made George Washington a great man. He said that contrary to popular belief, Washington "wasn't primarily a military hero or a political hero." Rather, as historian Gordon Wood has explained, "Washington became a great man and was acclaimed as a classical hero because of the way

he conducted himself during times of temptation. It was his moral character that set him off from other men."²

Apparently Washington patterned his life after a 16th-century guidebook, the purpose of which was "to improve inner morals by shaping the outward man." The book and thus Washington's code of conduct were "based on the same premise as the nation's Constitution--that human beings are flawed creatures who live in constant peril of falling into disasters caused by their own passions. (Therefore) Artificial systems have to be created to balance and restrain their desires."³

I think it's important that we, like Washington and the Apostle Paul, be aware of and admit that we're flawed human beings. All too often we modern humans live our lives hiding our humanness, our frailties, our imperfections, our mistakes, our errors of judgment, our flaws. But the greatness of the Apostle Paul and George Washington was not in their perfection but in the fact that they admitted their flaws and recognized that they were in constant danger of falling into disasters because of their flaws. So they worked hard, both of them, at improving themselves, especially when tempted by circumstances or persons or passions to be less than the persons God created them to be. They were more concerned with self-mastery than with self-indulgence.

A preacher named Brett Blair made three suggestions to help us improve and master ourselves, to be pro-active instead of re-active, to conduct ourselves better during times of temptation, to make more moral decisions as we dance through our lives.⁴

First, we should strive to make all of our decisions conscientious, well-thought-out decisions.

Second, we should try to never make a decision in haste.

² Brooks, David, "In Search of Dignity," *The New York Times* 7/8/09

³ Ibid.

⁴ eSermons.com Sermons, Brett Blair and Staff, ChristianGlobe Network, 2003, 0-0000-0000-01

Third, we should remember that the pressures in our lives usually affect good judgment.

How different today's gospel story would have been if Herod had tried to make a conscientious, well-thought-out decision--if he wouldn't have made his decision in haste--if he had recognized that the pressures of his wife, his stepdaughter, and those at his party were all working together to force him to do something that he didn't really want to do!

As Stephanie Broughton has written, "This is a story from the Bible of all too human failure that we should avoid in our own lives...When we allow ourselves to be manipulated by circumstances and other people in our lives, tragedy occurs. When we live only to please others, even though our behavior is obviously wrong, life is taken away. When we are only fascinated with God's messages and directions, more is required."⁵

One song that we have all probably heard a lot these past two weeks is Michael Jackson's "Man In The Mirror." Great words though in that song: "If you want to make the world a better place, then look at yourself and make a change." How different our lives and our world would be if we all spent more time really taking an honest look at ourselves and then worked at mastering our selves, improving ourselves, becoming persons of integrity instead of just bouncing through life as we are prone to do, as King Herod did.

But thanks be to God, we are not alone in our struggles. As the Apostle Paul exclaimed after he admitted his frustration with himself, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Indeed, thanks be to God for giving us Jesus as an example of how to live our lives. Thanks be to God for forgiving us and giving us repeated chances to repent and do better. And thanks be to God and for sending us the Holy Spirit to help us in the dance we call our lives. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; July 12, 2009

⁵ Broughton, Stephanie, "A Horrible Example," *Biblical Preaching Journal* (Summer 1994, Vol. 7, No. 3)