

First Congregational Church of Westfield  
Rev Julie Olmsted  
The Praising, the Lighting Up, the Dance  
Sermon on Mark 6: 14-29 (John the Baptist Beheading)  
July 11, 2021

This is a message about dancing. There are many kinds of dancing. There's physical dancing and there's the dance of life.

Our first look in scripture is a conflicted man. King Herod does a kind of dance, a dance of indecision, of ego and inner turmoil. Just a little background. Herodias was married to Philip, half-brother of Herod. They were divorced. Herod himself was also divorced and took Herodias to be his wife. Now, you might think that John the Baptist would keep quiet on these matters, but John was not known for his discretion. He was outspoken and critical. He had said that the marriage between these two (Herod and Herodias, how cute) was against Mosaic law. Not that they cared about Mosaic law, but nevertheless, John felt it his duty to inform them of this factoid. When Herod kept hearing about all this Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, he became annoyed. And, he became fearful. Fearful because of the terrible thing he had done.

Here is something interesting about Herod. He liked old John. He liked him and thought he was a "holy and just" man. It wasn't "politically correct" to like John. It didn't line up with his status or his associates and their ideas about life. Herodias couldn't have cared less. She hated that John had called them out for marrying; she felt it was none of his business. So, she wanted him killed. But Herod couldn't do it. He was fearful to kill such a holy man. And he was fearful when he heard about Jesus. *What if this guy is John the Baptist come back to life?? What if he has come to dole out justice for what I did?* This is typical thinking for someone who has sinned grievously. You can't forgive yourself, you can't hope to receive God's forgiveness (no confession, no experience of forgiveness), and you can't help but live in fear that retribution is inevitable. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow, karma, and all that.

So, the actual story: Herod was having a party. A birthday party for himself. It was "an opportune time," as it says in my Women's Study Bible, New King James translation. An opportune time for what? To make a big splash. To impress others. To show power and pad his reputation, big time. There is great merriment and Herodias' daughter came in to dance. She wowed them. The wine had no doubt been flowing freely and Herod had had his share. He wasn't thinking too clearly. He was lit up. But he was so pleased with the dance, the merriment, and the party in general, he really put himself on the hook. "What would you like, my dearest?" he said to the daughter. "I'll give you anything, up to half of my kingdom." What would the daughter know about what to ask for? She had everything she wanted or needed. Hmmm, I know! I'll go ask mother. And mother knew just what to say. Give me the head of John the Baptist. Gulp. Oops. *Dear God, what have I done?* Things did not end well for John. And, I'll wager, not for Herod or his marriage.

Why do we have this little gem of a cautionary tale in the middle of the miracles of Jesus? What could be the significance of this rather gruesome, but fascinating tale? There is a party. The

wine is flowing. People are laughing, cutting up, having a good time. But in the shadows, there are dark motives. There are resentments. There are old scores to settle. There is a definite lack of humility and forgiveness and the presence of inflated ego and toxic anger. All is not well in the kingdom. And to make things worse, this man Jesus just gets more and more attention. So much so, the king thinks he threatens his power, the power he is so desperately hanging onto.

The dance was done perhaps in innocence. But the character behind the dance, pulling the strings had evil in her heart. The king wishes to reward the dancing girl for pleasing him and his guests. But the king is disturbed. The king is weak in his resolve, he is conflicted in his role as king, and he has made a public statement which he is too full of hubris to retract. He sells his soul to look good to his guests and to falsely honor his ill-intended wife. The dance is tainted. It leads to evil. What was beautiful is now ugly and deadly.

Compare now, if you will, this deadly dance to the dance of King David back in 2 Samuel, Chapter 6. The Ark of the Covenant is being brought to Jerusalem and they all, David and “all the choice men of Israel,” are traveling in a sort of parade, up from Judah. This “ark” is like a big golden seaman’s chest with poles on the top through rings for carrying. It was considered the holiest of holies, containing God himself. It was like a little church. Miniature size. They were parading and playing all kinds of musical instruments: harps, wind instruments, stringed instruments, on tambourines and cymbals. David led the charge, dressed only in a linen “ephod,” because his royal clothes were too hot to dance in. David danced because he loved the Lord. It was a holy dance, a dance that was as natural as walking. He, too, was lit up. He, too, was drunk. But, David was drunk on the Spirit, drunk on his love for God.

Each week you and I have the chance to worship. To praise God and remember who we are and whose we are. God has the way to redemption. God has the way to reconciliation. God has the way to living in the light, but lit up by love, by the power and freedom of forgiveness and service. It’s a Hallelujah thing. You and I descend from David, from these God lovers who don’t care who is watching, don’t mind taking a little risk, don’t mind being seen as a little “loosely wrapped.”

Dancing has many forms. We dance, one might say, from morning to night. From work to play, from sorrow to joy, from darkness to light. We are turning, turning, turning, and it is our love of God, our desire to please God, and our commitment to truth, peace and justice, that make us ripe for the dance. Jesus is sometimes called the Lord of the Dance, and I understand why. Nothing could hold him down, not even the grave. Here’s the invitation this morning, and every day, my friends: GO AHEAD AND DANCE. Don’t wait till you get to heaven. Bring a little heaven down here and dance.