

July 12, 2015

TEXT: Mark 6:14–29

TITLE: Tainted Wishes

Mark's gospel opens with a quote from the prophet Isaiah: *Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness.* To whom do those words refer? John the Baptist. John points to Jesus literally and literarily. Literally John the Baptist's message always drew attention away from himself and pointed to the one who would follow him, who would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. But in terms of the literature of the gospel, John the Baptist prepares us as readers to fully understand the good news of Jesus Christ. His story teaches us about the power of true justice and the peril of wishing for the wrong things.

Mark 6 contains two big stories—the story of the death of John the Baptist and the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000. Both of them are banquets, but quite different from one another. Herod Antipas, who wasn't really a king (more on that later), was hosting a birthday party at his palace. All the right people were there for all the wrong reasons—members of the royal court, military bigwigs, temple hotshots—the entire entourage sticking close to one in power solely for the perks and privileges that might come along their way. At this feast, the wealthy reclined on pillows and couches, while slaves circled the room, offering them food and drink. The king's stepdaughter is brought out and she does a lurid dance to entertain the guests. Later, as a result of human vanity and palace intrigue, Herod will have John the Baptist beheaded and display his head on a platter. Sadly, at Herod's birthday party, that grisly execution was just one more part of the day's unholy entertainment.

Compare that banquet with the next meal described in the gospel. Jesus has spent the day, not entertaining in a palace but teaching beside a quiet stretch of seashore. Here all the wrong people were gathered for all the right reasons—fishermen, farmers, hardworking yet poor people who were hungry for a word of faith and comfort in that rough land. At this feast, the crowd of simple folks was invited to sit down on the grass. They took a load off their feet while the disciples, the leaders for that day, went among them with the few loaves they had to share. Miraculously they all had enough to eat. No dances, no flaunting of disposable income, no grim abuse of power; instead it was a banquet of justice in which the last came first and all were fed. Comparing these stories helps us understand the fullness of what Christ came to live and teach.

There's another story that should be put side by side with Herod's birthday party in Mark 6. Answer this question: John the Baptist is to Herod as Jesus Christ is to (blank)? Pontius Pilate. Herod knew John to be a righteous and holy man; and even though Herod had him arrested for being critical of his marriage to Herodias, scripture says he liked to listen to him. But in the midst of the big party, with liquor and dancing and crazy promises made in front of people whose

respect he craved, Herod ended up doing the wrong thing and John lost his head. Later we read about Pontius Pilate—another nervous leader serving the powers in Rome, who was intrigued by Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate took time to interrogate him in private and even defend him before a bloodthirsty mob that wanted him crucified. But in the end, Pilate also ended up doing the wrong thing; afraid of the crowd, afraid of diminishing his reputation, he washed his hands of Jesus' fate and allowed him to be executed on a cross.

Here were two men of power—Herod and Pilate—who were more weak than evil. They allowed something other than righteousness and truth to determine their courses of action. They lost their focus. Elie Wiesel tells a whimsical story about a merchant who went to his local rabbi to complain that his business has been terrible lately. The rabbi asked him, "In earlier days, did you have customers all the time?" to which the man said, "No, not all the time." "And what did you do while you were waiting for customers?" asked the rabbi. "I studied the Torah," replied the man. "And now, what do you do while you wait?" "I read the newspaper." The rabbi then said, "See? There's the problem. Before, when you studied God's law, the evil spirit sent you customers to distract you from study. Now that you read papers, the evil spirit doesn't care if you keep on reading."¹

It's easy to stop focusing on the things that really matter. How many of you have gone to the grocery store for two items, been distracted by what's displayed on the shelves and end up returning home with everything except the things you needed? How many times have you started your day with a list of things to be done only to hear the phone ring, a knock at the door, and do a bit of channel-surfing on the television until the sun sets without anything being crossed off your list? Or, like Herod and Pilate, how often have we known in our hearts what we need to do—but because we hate conflict or because we don't like to admit we made a mistake or because we worry that others will think less of us, we do the wrong thing for all the wrong reasons?

Earlier we heard the famous story of Solomon forced to choose between the competing claims of two women fighting over one baby. The woman who stole the baby knew how important it was to have a child, because since she wasn't married, she would need someone to take care of her when she was older and perhaps earn money to support them both. When she stole the baby, her focus was not on love but rather on self-interest. When the other woman saw that Solomon was going to cut the baby in half, she surrendered her maternal rights since her focus had never wavered from her love of the child. Solomon could tell which woman hadn't lost focus and so he did the just and right thing.

Herod's throne rested on shaky ground. He was not a king, but only a tetrarch—someone appointed to govern $\frac{1}{4}$ of the southern corner of the Roman Empire. He kept petitioning the emperor to name him "king," but it never happened. So he struggled to be accepted, to curry favor, ever afraid of losing whatever slim status he possessed.

Likewise, Herodias knew she was in an awkward position. When she married Herod after being his brother's wife, she was acting ambitiously and in defiance of the accepted laws of the land. People whispered about her scandal in private, but John the Baptist had preached about her sin out in the open. Herodias' focus moved from recognizing John as a righteous man to seeing him as a social embarrassment and someone who must be silenced. She was motivated by self-interest and a wounded pride, which when coupled with Herod's insecurity, led to a misdirected focus that put John's severed head on a platter.

It shouldn't be so easy to lose our focus. Remember the Ten Commandments and what the first one says: *You shall have no other gods before me, says the Lord.* Remember when Jesus was asked to name the most important rules of faith and he said, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Remember when Jesus threw a party, he didn't sit on cushions and wait on slaves to serve him. Rather he had the people rest on the ground and with his disciples he served them the bread of life. Remember when Jesus taught on the hillside and named off the people who are blessed in this life? He didn't start with palaces and politicians of power but named instead the meek, the poor, the peacemakers, the merciful, those who don't lose their focus but who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

How can we maintain our focus? One simple answer is to slow down. Here's an easy example. Traffic engineers point out the obvious fact that the faster we drive, the less we see. Given our evolutionary history, we are physically not designed to move faster than we can run, which tops out around 20 mph. So once we drive faster than 20 mph, humans aren't able to establish eye contact with pedestrians.² We can't focus on them, truly see them and have them see us back, which means we lose that opportunity for social communication. At that speed, our focus shifts to the road, to the other big things ahead of us and wherever it is we are racing to get to. So the risk to pedestrians increases incredibly once we drive faster than 20 mph, because they are no longer our focus – and thus risk being expendable as we pursue our other goals.

When we wish for things but our focus has shifted away from God, from Christ, from justice and love, then our wishes will always be flawed and tainted. We stop seeing what is most important. Like Herodias, we wish to silence our critics even though they speak the truth. Like Herod, we wish to save face even though it means beheading a righteous prophet. Like Pilate, we wish the whole mess would go away, so we wash our hands and the Son of God is crucified.

Maybe the secret to regaining our focus is to slow down—to slow down less than 20 mph, racing through life to wherever we think we need to be. Slow down so we can listen to the wisdom of God's word, of Jesus' teachings, letting the Holy Spirit calm and nurture us body and soul. It means taking a moment in crucial times of decision to pray – remembering to include God in the conversation,

holding Christ before us as we make up our minds. Remember John the Baptist and Herod, Pilate and Jesus Christ and don't lose focus. God wishes only the best for us—salvation, healing, peace. It's got to be a good thing for us to wish for the same things as God. Let's focus on that.

AMEN

¹ Elie Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers, p. 431.

² Tom Vanderbilt, Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do, 2008, p. 195.