

A Tale of Two Meals
Matthew 14:13-21
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Although, there may be no two characters more different in the New Testament than Jesus and Herod, they certainly had a lot in common, or at least a lot of points of contact. Contemporaries separated in age by about sixteen years, each governed a kingdom, Herod ruling over Galilee and Perea, Jesus ruling over the Kingdom of heaven. Each was the subject of prophecy by John the Baptist, Herod challenged about his adultery with his half-brother's wife, and Jesus challenged to fulfill all righteousness at his baptism in the river Jordan. They even shared a moment face to face in the final days of Jesus' life, Herod being called in by Pilate for a consultation on what to do with this enemy of the Jewish leaders. And finally, to the point of today's story, each held their party guests in high regard, Herod so much so that he brought death to his party, and Jesus so much that he brought life to his.

The story preceding the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew is the story of Herod being Herod, tricked into having John the Baptist beheaded while entertaining the dinner guests at his birthday party. You may remember how Salome, the daughter of Herod's second wife, Herodias, pleased Herod so much with her dancing that he promised her "whatever she might ask," an oath uttered in front of his friends, and probably his political advisors, which could not be taken

back when young Salome asked for John's head on a platter. And so the deed was done, the final course of a gruesome meal. And all done, as Matthew tells us, "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests." Herod could not be inconvenienced by a question of life and death, and so chose the easier path of murdering an innocent man when all that doing the right thing would have cost him was the smallest measure of pride. If one can't admit one's mistakes among friends, I guess there is no admitting any mistake.

Jesus too faces an inconvenient question of life and death: to send away hungry a crowd of thousands, or to feed them on what seems like enough for not even for his own disciples. Perhaps no one in the crowd would have died of hunger on the way to the nearest village, but the message Jesus had just so carefully delivered might have suffered had he taken the disciples' wisdom as the best course of action: "send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." If there was an action that would have betrayed Jesus message of hope and compassion, that would have been it. Hadn't he been teaching compassion and community? Certainly, he had hoped for a day off, a chance to mourn the death of his cousin, but instead of having some quiet time, he found himself surrounded by yet more crowds seeking healing and teaching. And so, like Herod, he is faced by a decision: to do the right thing, or to do the convenient thing. Jesus chose differently than Herod, thanks be to God.

In the aftermath of these decisions, we are left with a tale of two meals, and a chance to look in the mirror at our own decision-making. Which feast will we join, which party guests will we invite? Of course, it is more than a little unfair to compare Jesus to Herod, but hey, in politics, you do leave yourself open to public scrutiny. But Herod is not alone in that regard. His position may have been a little higher in its profile, but even in our lowly positions, we do not live our lives in a Christian closet, but in public, in the polis, the city, the public sphere where any prying eye can hold our actions up to the same scrutiny Herod received. It goes without saying that when comparing ourselves with Jesus, our image will suffer too. But that won't hurt us, because no one really stacks up against Jesus. What will hurt us is when Herod doesn't look so bad after all, compared to us! Then we are in trouble.

So what are the lessons to be learned from these two meals? Well, first, let me suggest that it really does matter who you invite or whose party you choose to attend; hanging out with the right people is not nearly as helpful as hanging out with righteous people. Back in Pittsburgh, I worked at a residential drug and alcohol rehab center for pregnant women, a place that was located far away from the environment from which its residents had come. In such a place, they could get free, at least for a little while, from the influences which had led them into addiction, and be able to concentrate on the healing that was necessary to have a healthy new baby. One of the strongest emphases of that program was re-entry,

how to survive once they left that place of security, how to say no, how to find support for their sobriety, how to avoid going to parties of death, and to find parties of life. More than we might like to think, our choices of whom to associate ourselves with makes a big difference in our ability to be faithful. We don't know a lot about Herod Antipas, but it is not too risky to surmise that he was the type of person to surround himself with people who would tell him what he wanted to hear, rather than what he needed to hear, to be a better ruler, or person. Evidently, he was overly sensitive to honest criticism, the likes of which John the Baptist offered. He didn't seem to surround himself with friends to whom he could admit a mistake, and so felt trapped by his public oath. Herod was hanging out with the wrong crowd; he had invited the wrong guests to his birthday party. This is not to say that we should spend all of our time in the company of people just like ourselves; far from it! Jesus led his disciples into relationship with all kinds of people who were outside their sphere of righteousness, the famous "tax collectors and sinners," the lame and impure who had followed him out to that deserted place to be healed. But it is to say that we need to be connected to a community that leads us into righteousness. Where was it that Jesus used to go every once in a while? To a deserted place to pray, to reconnect with his community, his Trinity, to a meal with righteous people, not just the right people.

We might also take a look at the kind of parties we throw, so to speak, or the meals we serve. Are we throwing parties to celebrate ourselves, or to celebrate

God's grace? While it is certainly right to celebrate things like birthdays, it is not always easy to celebrate the right thing on such an occasion. My hunch is that Herod was not celebrating God's gift of his life, but rather his own celebrity. This was a party to show how great he was, not how great his God was. And so it is at the level of our motivations and consistency that we must also dwell. You have no doubt heard how many churches and social service organizations offer special meals for the homeless on major holidays in the United States. On Thanksgiving and Christmas and sometimes Easter, they serve the traditional holiday foods, and seek volunteers to slap some turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes and gravy on a tray. Maybe you've even done that yourselves some year. And if you did, you know that these organizations are absolutely overrun with volunteers on those special days. They have so many people wanting to serve that they can barely accommodate them all. But remember, we are dealing now with our motivations, and despite the fact that I truly do not question the intentions of these humble servants of the poor, I do wonder where they are the rest of the year, during the hot dog days of August and the biting cold nights of February, when the same people need to be fed day in and day out, and the shelters struggle to have enough staff to meet the need. You may infer what you will of the motivations of those who come to serve on the days for which they are most grateful for their own abundance. I will infer from the story of the feeding of the five thousand that Jesus' disciples probably preferred showing up just twice a year, and not when they were needed

the most. But there was Jesus, telling them, “You give them something to eat,” as if it were August or February.

Finally, let me note one last difference between Herod and Jesus at their meals, one which touches me personally when I stand before you during the meal we regularly take together, our communion. As many times as I have read this story, I never really noticed until this week the phrase, “he looked up to heaven,” which precedes what has become the formula of “blessed, broke, gave” that is the liturgy in most every Christian church that celebrates the sacrament. Now it is true that the phrase, “he looked up to heaven,” does not appear in any of the other accounts of this story in the other three Gospels, nor in the stories of Jesus’ last supper, but it is here, and it is important, especially if we imagine Herod’s moment of decision when asked for John’s head on a platter. Maybe it is all the movies I have watched in my life, but I see it in slow motion: Herod’s head turning from right to left, scanning the expectant faces of his guests, looking for some sign telling him he doesn’t have to go through with it. And finding no righteous counsel in their eyes, he gives the order. Herod’s eyes search right to left; Jesus’ eyes search up and down. Now, those of you who have participated in Communion as I have presided have probably noticed that as I break the bread, I too look right and left as I hold the broken bread out for you to see. I do this partly to share the symbolism of the bread with those who are farther away from it than I am, but mostly I do it out of habit. I suppose there is nothing wrong with doing it that way,

but maybe it might be more right if I looked up to heaven, rather than at you, at the moment of our common remembrance of such an amazing act of grace. In which direction do our eyes most regularly move?

Friends, as we share this communion meal again tonight, before we each break off our piece of bread, let me invite you to literally “look up to heaven,” and ask God to make this meal of grace one which transforms all our meals. Amen.