

**Shoot the Messenger!**  
**6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 12, 2009**  
**Mark 6:14-29**

Okay. Let's assume for the sake of argument that *nobody* has as tangled a family tree as does Herod Antipas. The man would make the tackiest jokes about kinfolk seem downright wholesome. His father, Herod the Great, who ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem boys, had married 5 times and had 7 sons, although why he bothered is a mystery. He had three of them murdered; coincidentally their names all began with the letter "A." Two other sons were named Herod Something; and one of *them* also shared the name Phillip with yet another brother. Herodias, the elder Bad Girl in today's Gospel, was the daughter of one of those lamented "A" sons, married first to Herod Phillip, then to Herod Antipas, the Herod of today's Gospel. Herod A. evidently seduced her away from Herod P. while they lived in Rome and he was visiting. Oh, and Herodias' daughter Salome, she of the infamous dance, eventually married that *other* Phillip, also one of Herod Antipas' half-brothers. Got that? There'll be a quiz!

Clearly, Herod and Herodias broke all sorts of commandments just by walking into a room. And John the Baptist called them on it. Herod had already imprisoned him because of John's calls for repentance and his pronouncement of divine disfavor upon corrupt religious and political leaders. But prison hadn't shut John up. He announced the unpleasant and unpopular truth that in God's eyes, a leader's personal immorality was as offensive as his political injustice.

Herodias was simply and straightforwardly irate. She loathed John; as one commentator put it, she wanted to be left alone to sin in peace. Herod, though, was surprisingly ambivalent about John. He was fascinated as well as threatened by John's uncompromising devotion to the truth. Herod listened gladly, but was also dismayed by what he heard. He loved John for his stern righteousness, even as he himself lived a corrupt, immoral, dissolute lifestyle.

In his ambivalence, if nothing else, Herod Antipas was surprisingly and uncomfortably similar to most of us. Oh, he was certainly more rascally than we could ever be. But think about it. How many of us are fascinated by the incandescent saintliness of someone like Mother Teresa, while secretly thanking God that we are evidently not called to a life like hers? How grateful we are to be let off the holiness hook.

How many of us feel a kinship with the little old lady who had a secret hankering for chewin' tobaccy. When the preacher thundered, "Those who dance and cuss are an affront to the Lord," the little old lady shouted, "Preach it!" from her back pew. "Those who let whisky and strong drink pass their lips sin against God!" "Preach it, brother!" she responded heartily. "And those who use tobacco products stand under God's judgment!" At this the little old lady stood up and announced, "Now you've stopped preachin' and started meddlin'!"

How many of us love God and the Church, love reading the Bible and praying, but become uncomfortable and very defensive when certain pet sins are exposed and condemned and we are called to repent of them. We make excuses; we play the blame game. It's an age-old problem. I know

I've said this before: Adam blamed Eve when God confronted their disobedience: "*This woman that you gave me offered me the fruit, and I ate.*" Eve blamed the serpent: "This serpent (you can almost hear her mutter, *that you created!*) beguiled me, and I ate." And of course the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on, so he wisely kept quiet - though *he* didn't escape judgment, either!

When someone has the gall, or the persistence, to thrust *our* sins beneath *our* noses, so that we can't blame, excuse, or weasel our way out, we're often furious at the messenger. Like Adam and Eve, we blame someone else. Like the little old lady, we walk out. Like Herod – or more properly, Herodias, we kill the messenger, figuratively if not literally.

Like every sinner on the face of the planet, we find ways to shout, "Crucify!" to the One whom John baptized in the Jordan. Sort of like Herod, we're both attracted to and dismayed by Jesus. Oh, he doesn't shame, lecture or browbeat us; he would *love* us into repentance. Yet our pet sins scream for us to refuse him; to suggest that he meddle in someone else's life because after all they need it *so* much more than we do.

"Jesus loves me just the way I am!" That's our common theme song. And it rings true. Jesus *does* love us just the way we are, whether we're first-class rakehells like Herod or two-bit rascals like...well, like most of us actually are. Jesus welcomes into his presence, and invites into his Kingdom, prostitutes, centurions, tax collectors, Pharisees, tinkers, tailors, beggar-men, and thieves. He welcomes you and me, with all our tired excuses and shabby sinfulness. He indeed loves us just the way we are.

But we sometimes forget Verse Two of our theme song: "Jesus loves us just the way we are, *but he loves us too much to leave us the way he found us!*" In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' first word echoes John the Baptist's message: "*Repent!*" The whole New Testament is littered with phrases like, "Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." "You must be *born anew* from above." "Your sins are forgiven; go, and sin no more." "Do not be conformed to this world, *but be transformed* through the renewal of your minds." "So you must consider yourselves *dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have *crucified* the flesh with its passions and desires. If we *live by the Spirit*, let us also be *guided by the Spirit.*"

We might want some of the tiresome junk deleted from our lives, but what about the sins we really enjoy? It's not much of a do-it-yourself project, is it? Can we really be blamed for being offended by such a message; for sticking to Verse One of our theme song; or for shooing (or shooting) the messenger offstage?

That's pretty much how our Gospel reading ends: with John's disciples burying his headless corpse. Herod and Herodias don't have to listen to his insistent voice any more. They can go and sin in peace. But those words quiver in the air. *Repent. Be perfect. Be born anew. Be transformed. Be dead to sin, alive in Christ.* We listen, and perhaps sin, more uneasily.

Thank God that the Gospel doesn't end with John being buried, but with Jesus Christ being raised. Thank God that the Gospel goes on, in the life of the Church, among people who are rakehells and rascals; and who

are forgiven sinners, daily being crucified and raised up as a new creation. Jesus lavishes, upon all who can bear to receive it, the love of his Father that not only accepts us as we are but also refuses to let us languish in that sorry state. When we're baptized, God bestows the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism at John's hand. Our Savior feeds us with his very Body and Blood, so that we might be nourished with his life and transformed into his likeness. In stead of shouting "Crucify," we're able proclaim Jesus as Lord to the glory of the Father. We are graced with the Spirit to speak even hard truths in love to one another, and to the world, that all should repent, turn from their sins, and live.

Nobody likes having their head bitten off in the process, of course. Not one of us would consider having our heads served back to us on a silver platter as a resume-enhancing career move! And we always take a risk when we try to live as faithful truth-speakers and fearless servants of Jesus Christ. But it's no more the end of the story for us than it was for John. Our little song has not one, not two, but three verses – we're good Trinitarians after all. Jesus loves us just the way we are. He loves us too much to leave us the way he found us. And he loves us so much that he won't let anyone else have the last word over us.

Shoot the messenger? I guess the world, the devil, and our sinful selves have tried that. But no matter how successful it seems, ultimately God promises, in the death and resurrection of his Son, that we might as well have been shooting blanks.

Thank God for his holiness, his love, and his promise of steadfast faithfulness to his servants; and say Amen to this prayer: "Almighty God,

by whose providence your servant, John the Baptist, was wonderfully born, and was sent to prepare the way of our Savior, by preaching of repentance: Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth: to your eternal glory and for the salvation of all whom you love for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord."