



## Politics as Usual

Mark 6:14-29

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Let's make one thing very clear: Herod Antipas, the key figure in this story, was a bad man. He was egotistical, vain, vicious, cruel, and superstitious. He saw himself as special, above the law. That being said, these characteristics weren't at all uncommon in kings of biblical times. As a king, after all, he *was* the law.

And having said that, it must also be noted Herod's character defects – the instincts that drove his actions – are part of our human condition. In other words, there's a little Herod in all of us. That's pretty easy to forget, though, until you face a situation like Herod did at his birthday party.

King Herod's quandary is, in modern times, a standard comedy formula: a person shoots his mouth off, makes some outrageous statement, then is forced to try and make good on his words. Either we get to watch the poor guy fail miserably, always good for a chuckle, or we laugh ourselves silly as he figures out a way to outsmart his challengers, and in the end everyone's happy.

The problem is, in real life, someone is going to lose. Someone always has to pay the price. Like John.

It's this business of *payment* that is at the heart of this: finding yourself in a sticky situation, without an obvious good choice, what are you willing to pay to get out of it?

Some things are right, some are wrong, of course; clearly so. Most of us have a pretty good idea of which is which in a majority of cases, and, on the whole, we would choose to do the right. Still, there are at least two situations in which doing the right thing can get very complicated: first, when it means getting hurt or brings unpleasant consequences; and second, when it means hurting others we care for.

How uncomfortable would you need to be before you gave in and did something you knew wasn't right? How tempting would the reward have to be?

If being here in this sanctuary were a crime, would you be here today? Thousands of Muslim Chinese Uighurs answered that question Friday by going to prayer services that were banned by the Chinese government. Could you?

How about if you knew your *family* would be arrested if you came, would you still show up?

This may seem an extreme example. But remember that Herod was not willing to *spare* a man's *life* if it meant loss of face, that he would be embarrassed. Given a choice between looking like a fool and taking another human being's life, he killed. He was not willing to say to his step-daughter, "Well, actually, I was thinking more of a bunch of gold jewelry or some fancy clothes...Look. I was exaggerating. A bit too much wine; my mouth was writing checks I really can't cash. Run off and tell your mother it was a good try, though."

We know, deep inside, that Herod's act was wrong. In fact, it was a total waste. Herod was caught either way: the same courtiers that would have made fun of him – privately – for renegeing on his rash, drunken promise still chuckled among themselves at how he'd been outmaneuvered by his wife and her daughter.

What do you do when you're faced with a dangerous choice when a choice must be made, and there's no safe alternative available? There are times, it's true, when we might get ourselves in a bind, do something rash, pull a Herod, and find ourselves somewhere we didn't really mean to be as a result of our own bad judgment. But there are other times when we're caught up through no fault of our own, snared in something like that High School logic trap: "Answer yes or no: have you stopped beating your wife?" Answer yes, you've admitted to the crime; answer no, you've done the same thing – you can't even explain that you're not married, let alone that you've never hurt a flea!

That's something of the situation Robert McNamara, who died this week, faced: having accepted the task of running the Vietnam War, he was never able to successfully explain the circumstances he believed forced his choices, never able to say convincingly, "I did the best I could with what I had." So the war became his legacy, just as this story did for Herod.

This is politics as usual. The word "politics" comes from the Greek for "city", and it really has to do with how people get along together. Everything, in the end, is political, and from a Presbyterian perspective, people don't do politics very well. Being human, we easily become self-involved. We can't ever seem to get *ourselves* out of the way; we tend to follow our own interests. We compound it the problem by deploring the same tendency in others: we get very testy when some public figure looks out for him or herself, but we're still happy to practice it ourselves.

So what *are* we to do? If there were some simple formula, we'd know it already. Still, we have some clues. We even have some guidance from John the Baptist, as it turns out: When John was doing his ministry down by the Jordan, some time before his arrest by our Herod, Luke tells us (Ch 3. vv10-14). This sounds very much like the best teaching of the Old Testament prophets, one of which is exactly what people were thinking John

might be. As the prophet Micah said, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

But these are strong, beautiful words, words of a holy person, words of God. You and me, well, we’re just people. And that is, in the end, the point: we are people, and God is God. The best we can do as people will always fall short of perfection, of the high standards of the Gospel. God really is in charge; our lives, their ups and downs and sometimes sideways slides, are a part of something much bigger than ourselves, however hard that may be to accept even in the best of times.

But even in the midst of the waters we’ve been muddying, there is still a clear center: we *do* know what is *wrong*. Even Herod did; that’s why the news of Jesus’ work troubled him so. There just isn’t enough power in anyone’s hands to escape the pangs of remorse.

Herod made his choice. We make ours. About the closest parallel to the freedom to think and act that a king like Herod had is being an American adult now living. He had the power and the ability to do as he wished, and he did it: we do, too, in many ways.

And Herod was haunted by the consequences. In the end, the price he paid was his own peace. But justice was the ultimate victim – and thanks to politics as usual, it will continue to be in this world. And as for us, it’s a process: every day doing the best we can, trusting God, remembering that life in faith is a journey, not a destination.