

At Your Own Risk

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, July 15, 2012.
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 6:14-29*

In our Episcopal tradition, our *Book of Common Prayer* lists four Sundays in the year that are considered especially appropriate for Baptism. Any idea what they are? Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints', and Baptism of Our Lord (first Sunday after Epiphany). At St. Bart's we also offer baptisms on two other Sundays in the year—one in July and one in September—so that anyone who wants to be baptized or to have their child baptized won't have to wait too long.

Today is one of our "extra" Baptism days. It is especially joyous, as are all Baptism days (yes, I'm biased!). For me, Baptisms are one of the very best things about being a priest. Families have flown from the far corners of the world to be here to support and celebrate these baptisms. I know we have godparents here today who've come from as far away as Hong Kong and Australia. Families make big efforts to be here, to get here on time, to bring everything that might be needed—water, formula, extra diapers. Everyone gets dressed up. There is excitement, and likely some understandable nervousness: Will we stand in the right place? Will we say our lines right? What if our baby screams bloody murder? What if big sister/brother makes a sudden dash for the exit?

Those of you who have witnessed baptisms, especially those of you who have brought your own young children to be baptized—I see you smiling—you know exactly how this feels! I assured everyone at our Baptism class and rehearsal yesterday that whatever happens is just fine—we just fold it in and move right on. It's a very special day in the life of our community when a person is baptized into the Christian faith and life, when a new person—of whatever age—is welcomed into the Church.

It's a day when we use everything in our Episcopal/Anglican tradition and everything in St. Bart's radical welcome to say, "Welcome to the Church!" On such a day, what turns up for our gospel reading but this tawdry, graphic story of Herod and Herodias and John the Baptist's head on a platter? Welcome to the Church!

On the face of it, this story doesn't seem to have anything to do with baptism or welcome. Its appearance today feels rather embarrassing. It feels a bit like when your daughter/son tells you they're bringing someone very special home to meet you, or when you offer to host your brother's wedding reception in your home. You freshen up the paint, you get the carpets cleaned and the windows washed and the silver polished, you make sure the menu is just right, you take extra care with your own outfit. Everyone arrives with excitement and anticipation and a little nervousness, and things get off to a really promising start. Then the dog grabs the turkey off the table and runs out the door with your main course clenched in its teeth, a mad triumphant gleam in its eye.

After the initial horror and chaos, everyone is likely to laugh, feeling bonded in a new way. Any pretense has been swept away. Here our family is, in all our humanness. Welcome to our family!

These things happen. Gospels happen. This is real life. Life doesn't always happen according to our plans or as we would wish, even in the Church. Not a bad lesson for Baptism.

This story of Herod and Herodias and John is not one we'd prefer to trot out to welcome new members to the Church. It shows some of the worst behaviors we humans are capable of. But it also contains some real-life lessons that track pretty well with the baptism vows we'll all take in just a few minutes.

One person in our Bible Study group this week, who was raised in a different strand of the Christian tradition, said this exact passage was the one pointed to in that tradition as the reason dancing was not allowed: if you take up dancing, look what it leads to! To be clear, that is *not* one of the real-life lessons we draw from this story today.

Herod isn't actually a king, but a "tetrarch" of Galilee, one of four rulers of Roman-occupied territory; he's a puppet of the Roman government, and we know he will be involved in Jesus' death as well. But Herod has power, no doubt about it. And we know what power does to people, yes? We know how power gets used and mis-used, and how it changes people.

Herod is one of the seven sons of Herod the Great, and Herodias was the daughter of another of those sons (yes, that makes her her husband's niece). In his paranoia, Herod the Great murdered three of his sons for fear they would try to depose him. Of the four remaining sons, three marry either Herodias or Herodias' dancing daughter. To say this family tree is complex and disturbing is a wild understatement.

In something of a matrimonial shell game, Herod sent away his first wife, then married his brother's wife Herodias while his brother (her ex-husband) is still alive, which puts Herod in violation of the Jewish law. John has pointed this violation out to Herod. Which is what landed John in prison. And which has made Herodias hate him.

Speaking truth to power is risky business. It takes courage. Sometimes we are called to speak truth to power, when that truth is even more important than the personal consequences.

Herodias is powerful, too, and scheming and malevolent. She uses everything at her disposal, including her daughter. The daughter, not named here, but by tradition called "Salome," seems every inch her mother's daughter. It is the daughter who adds the horrible instruction, "on a platter."

Herod makes this promise to the girl whose dance has pleased him so much: I'll give you anything you want, even half my kingdom. Well, that's not exactly true: Rome owns Herod's "kingdom"—it's not his to give.

Herod is caught by his own boastful promise, and his own pride in front of his VIP guests. Keeping a promise is usually considered a good thing. But what if you realize you've made a mistake? Isn't it better to change your position than to keep standing firmly or even stubbornly on the wrong side of justice or of life?

When anyone is baptized in our community, we all renew our own baptism vows. Listen deeply to these vows we'll make. They call us to try to live our lives in a particular way:

A way that learns and draws strength from practicing together in this Christian community.

A way that perseveres in resisting evil in its various forms: by speaking truth to power, by turning our backs on and actively resisting all that is death-giving to ourselves and to others.

A way that has courage and humility enough to admit when we're wrong.

A way that calls us to reveal by our very own actions the great truth that each person is a beloved child of God—each person, period—even persons like Herod and Herodias and her daughter.

I believe the primary identity of every person is "beloved child of God." Whenever someone is baptized into the Christian faith, they are choosing to express that primary identity through the Christian path, by living the Christian way of life.

The truth is, this way of living, this following Jesus' example and teachings, is not easy. We are not perfect; life isn't perfect. But we are not called to be perfect. We are called to try our best, and to be there to help each other in our trying, to ask for and rely on God's help.

It's not easy, but it's the best way of living I know, and it's totally worth it.

Welcome to our (imperfect) family. Welcome to the Church!

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