



Pastor Gwen's message
10th Sunday after Pentecost
"Which party do you want to attend?"
Sunday, August 6, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

Do you remember last week when I said that I find something new very often while reading familiar Scripture passages. This week was no exception. I started thinking about how we are no different than those who crowded around to follow Jesus, at least I hope we are. I also go back and read what comes before and after the assigned text for the day to make sure I put our text in context. That is why I added in the verses about the death of John the Baptist. I got to thinking about how these two stories have very opposite messages and it might be good to look at them together.

I think you can tell a lot about people by the parties they put on. This is true in the Bible, and it is true today. The birthday party Herod throws for himself, is very different than the party of the 5000 who Jesus fed with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish. And interestingly, these two parties are one after another in Matthew's Gospel. And I doubt that it was an accident that they are recorded sequentially. No wonder I love this book of the Bible so much! I think Matthew wanted to show that even in his day, you can tell a lot about people by the parties they put on.

First, let's look at Herod's birthday party. Well, there are several Herods in Scripture. They are all related, but this one is Herod Antipas. Even though he established a city for the Roman empire called Tiberias, he is best remembered for this party. A little background on this King Herod is that he falls in love with his brother Philip's wife. John, the Baptist spoke out about the King's subsequent divorce and so he was thrown in prison. Herod did not appreciate such condemnation, so he wanted to put John to death but was afraid of the many followers of the prophet and their reactions. John had many people that even

thought he might be the Messiah. And so, King Herod threw him in prison for the time being.

And now it is time for the big birthday bash. Food and drinking are in abundance as well as dancers. The King's stepdaughter who was also his niece, Salome, is the main attraction. Everyone is enamored by her beauty and gives her a standing ovation as it were. Herod then is so taken with her that he offers her anything she wants as a reward.

Salome does not know what to ask for. So, she goes to her mother, Herodias, the King's new wife and asks her what she should request. Herodias has the perfect answer. She tells her daughter to ask the King for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. You see Herodias did not like John either for when he was speaking about the divorce that made her queen, she felt belittled. And what a great way to get back at John, to put him to death.

So, the young girl goes back to King Herod and tells him her request. Herod is rather dumfounded, as he never expected such a request. But now since it was spoken, He had no choice as he could not go back on a promise in front of all these important guests. He orders John the Baptist to be beheaded. Soon the soldiers return with John's head dripping with blood on a platter. Salome brings the platter over and gives it to her mother, as if it were some sort of a trophy. Interesting, that she did not get sick at the sight. However, I imagine those with queasy stomachs were probably in shock or worse.

You can tell a lot about a person by the kind of parties they put on. Herod knew how to build cities but was not attuned to how to live life. His birthday party turns into an occasion for exploitation of those with qualities of lust, cowardice, hatred, murder, and other such vices. It left those in the great hall with a spiritual poisoning of seeing the shameful death of God's prophet, John the Baptist. And this just feeds those in attendance who were there because it was a required state function or command performance. Not a lot of love for Herod present, it surely was a party where everyone went home with the memory of the grotesque vision of John's lifeless head on the platter.

And folks, I think you too realize that this sort of party or bash still rages in many places in our country. Not with the head on a platter, but certainly with indifference of attendees, people who were there just for the drugs, alcohol, and other illicit things going on. Look to the movies or the news to see the opulent gatherings in Hollywood. They are not so much about the person being celebrated, but instead about being seen in the newest see-thru outfit with a young buck on your arm. Get the picture. Maybe that is why we live so far away from such things, here in the north woods of Wisconsin.

A year ago, when we were planning an event to raise funds for the Lord's Cupboard, I had an idea that we should have a Black-Tie event. Rent a hall, sell expensive tickets, serve caviar and champagne and make sure select people were invited. After I heard that come out of my mouth, I realized it would be a huge flop. And where would Rodney get a tux and I would have to wear a dress. Yikes!!!! You can tell a lot about a person by the parties they

put on. And neither the Lord's Cupboard nor I were interested in exploiting others even for the sake of my favorite charity.

And now on to another party, open air in nature. Jesus takes a boat ride to a deserted place. He is most likely distressed hearing of the beheading of his friend, his cousin John. But no such luck, as his many, many followers walk along the shore to be near him. So, Jesus comes ashore to be among the people and heal their sick, one at a time. As the crowd grows the time is getting late. There are now about 5000 men and also uncounted women and children. With the sun setting, the disciples tell Jesus to send them away to nearby villages to buy food. Jesus has something else in mind and challenges the disciples to get on board and share the meager food they have, 5 loaves of bread and some fish. A huge picnic is about to take place. And remember that you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of party they put on.

Jesus throws a miracle party. It is one where all are fed and satisfied. Bread is blessed and broken and multiplies to feed everyone. The leftover crumbs are much more than what the disciples started distributing. A fine party of abundance where everyone was cared for and filled. Their needs were met as they crowded around the Giver of all Life. This party was a huge success and ends on a high note. Jesus felt compassion for the hungry crowds. He meets their needs. There is no lack of sustenance in this gift from God himself.

We can tell a lot about a person by the kind of party they put on. Herod's party was a command performance with guests looking for prestige. The birthday bash ends in such a negative way with the death of John the Baptist, where the guests leave no doubt in disgust.

Whereas the party Jesus puts on satisfies the needs of many. Compassion on the part of the Host of Hosts, results in filling a physical and spiritual need. Guests leave satisfied, as they have experienced God still working in their world.

These two parties are very different as you see here. I must say that I see these two parties not just as historic events but as real options in our world today. One represents death and the other is a way of abundant life. Today we are welcome at either party. So, what kind of guest do you want to be? What kind of party do you want to attend? One that gives life or one that results in death. Easy question to answer, right?

However, these two kinds of parties are alive and present today. We are invited to both in the here and now. The parties of the Herod kind are easy to find. They are the way of the world around us. The picnic party Jesus throws is a bit harder to locate. But not for us here today. I will be serving this meal at our worship party today, the Eucharistic meal, where Jesus comes to us in the bread and wine. But it is Jesus who initiates this meal as He comes to us. He invites us to join in this feast. This gift of himself is multiplied over and over

again right here in this sanctuary. Jesus died a horrible death so we could have forgiveness of our sins, abundant and eternal life. What a gracious gift we have here this morning.

Herod's party is at a cost of the death of a prophet, John. The price Jesus paid on the cross was giving His life to prove He is stronger than death.

You can tell a lot about people by the kind of party they put on. Whose party do you want to attend? AMEN

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