



## A Tale of Two Banquets

Mark 6:14-29 (30-44)

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The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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It is very difficult to say, “Praise to you, O Christ” at the end of this reading. It is a really horrible story. No matter how hard we squeeze today’s gospel lesson we’re not going to find much, if any, good news in it. It’s tempting to skip this one and jump into the story that immediately follows.

It is a familiar and comfortable story about Jesus and his disciples heading out to a deserted place for a bit of rest and relaxation, only to be welcomed by massive crowds of people. We hear that Jesus has compassion on them because they are like sheep without a shepherd, and so he begins to teach them. As the day draws to a close, the disciples urge Jesus to send the crowds away to find food for themselves in the countryside and villages, but Jesus tells them, “You give them something to eat.” They protest that they only have five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus orders all the people to sit down on the grass in groups of hundreds and fifties. He blesses the bread and divides it, giving it to his disciples to distribute. Ditto with the fish. “And all ate, and were filled” (Mark 6:42), and there were 12 baskets of leftovers. Those who ate with Jesus numbered 5000 men (Mark 6:44). No one bothered to count the women and children (Matthew 14:21).

Herod’s horrible banquet is the first in Mark’s tale of two banquets. It is intended to be heard together with Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 so that we can compare and contrast the two.

Herod throws a lavish banquet to celebrate his own birthday. Jesus hosts a simple meal of bread and fish because people are hungry. Herod’s birthday party is set in an opulent palace built by conscripted peasant laborers, filled with treasures looted in war, and paid for by wealth accumulated through the ruthless exploitation of his subjects. The setting for Jesus’ impromptu banquet is outdoors at a deserted and lonely place. Herod gathers around his table an A-list of noble courtiers, army officers and Galilean bigwigs — a coalition of the leading government, military and commercial interests. Jesus’ guests are the underpaid, malnourished, and exhausted peasants, exploited and oppressed by Herod and his cronies. Herod’s party is like an extreme power lunch — there is a super-abundance of the very best foods served on the finest of dishes to the privileged few. At Jesus’ party there are multitudes of hungry people with very few resources. Jesus describes his guests as sheep without a shepherd.

When Herod parties, the wine flows, young girls become sex objects and instruments of revenge, drunken promises are made, and a powerless prisoner is executed for entertainment. When Jesus parties hungry people are filled with nourishing food, the sick are healed, the ignorant are

educated, and there are twelve baskets of bread leftover. When Herod parties all that is leftover is John's head delivered on a plate. Herod hosts a banquet of death; Jesus hosts a banquet of life.<sup>1</sup>

Mark presents this tale of two banquets so that we can see side-by-side what the kingship of Herod and the kingship of Jesus look like. Herod's banquet is the one and only scene in Mark's Gospel where Jesus never makes an appearance. At Herod's party there is no room or place for Jesus. God/Christ/Holy Spirit are excluded and denied entry in spite of John the Baptist's preaching to Herod in private. Jesus' entire mission and ministry is about helping people see that God's kingdom was near — that God is in fact present here and now right in our midst.

Herod's kingship is entirely centered on one person — himself. His egocentric use of his power and position to gratify his own desires now in the present moment, twists and destroys every relationship that he has — his relationship with God, his first wife and her family, his second wife and her daughter, and the people he is supposed to rule. Herod uses his power over others to put people down, to diminish and deprive others of everything that is nourishing and sustaining, even life itself. Jesus' kingship is about using his power and position to nourish, to heal, to restore, to liberate, to build up the lives of others. Jesus does not use his power to lord it over others, he uses his power for others, empowering them to live fuller, deeper, more abundant lives rooted in God's loving and gracious presence.

Today's reading from Ephesians puts it this way: It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for (1:11, *MSG*).

Under Herod's kingship, if you don't make that A-list of nobles, army officers, and Galilean big-shots, you are nobody — just a talking tool to be used and discarded. In Christ, you are a beloved child of God, created in God's image and so worthy of love and respect. In Christ, every single person regardless of age or size, sickness or health, color or class, educational level or job, gender or sexual orientation, is a beloved child of God, created in God's image, worthy of love and respect. That is who you really are, no matter what the Herods of this world might say to the contrary.

Under Herod's kingship, you are called to live for success. The way of Herod is all about climbing the corporate and social ladder, never mind how many heads one has to step on to make it up to the next rung. It's about pursuing fame and fortune, accumulating more and more stuff, gratifying every desire. It's about being willing to sacrifice faith, ethics, relationships, potential friends — whatever it takes to hang on to prestige and power. This way of life is epitomized almost perfectly by Frank Underwood, the hero and villain of the Netflix series *House of Cards*, and by Don Draper, the lead character in *Mad Men*. Former President Richard Nixon might be another example of this kind of living for success. You can probably think of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, "Two Very Different Banquets," available at [http://day1.org/1259-two\\_very\\_different\\_banquets](http://day1.org/1259-two_very_different_banquets).

Under the kingship of Jesus, we are called to live for significance. A life of significance is one that matters, it stands for something, it makes a difference for others. The way of Jesus is all about making a positive, life-giving difference for someone else everyday and everywhere you go. The best part about living for significance is that you don't have to be successful — rich and famous, highly educated, hold a high-powered job, or anything like that. It is as simple as smiling and greeting a stranger you pass on the street, sharing your sandwich with a schoolmate who forgot hers, teaching a child to tie his shoes. I do need to warn you, though, that committing yourself to a life of significance will probably affect your career choices. It might lead you to devote some of your leisure time to volunteer for things like driving people to medical appointments or helping immigrants learn English. You may find yourselves moved by the needs of people around you to become an advocate for all kinds of causes ranging from better quality school lunches to protesting gun violence, or even to speaking the truth to the powers-that-be just as John the Baptist spoke the truth to Herod. That's where living a life of significance in Christ can get a little bit uncomfortable and, even dangerous.

Mark's tale of two banquets contrasts the kingship of Herod and the kingship of Jesus. Herod's horrible banquet epitomizes a selfish pursuit of personal success through power over others. It is twisted, destructive and death-dealing. In the feeding of the 5000 Jesus instructs his disciples to use their own resources to feed the multitude. It turns out that those seemingly meager resources were enough, and more than enough, to make a positive difference in meeting the needs of those hungry people. The good news is exactly that: not only are we good enough, but we have enough to make a real, positive, life-giving difference in our world today.

So my prayer for all of you today, and especially for our youth and their leaders heading to the Youth Gathering in Detroit, is that you will be significant, empowered by Christ's love to make a positive and lasting difference wherever you go. Amen.