

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

2 Samuel 6:1-23; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Whew. What to make of all this intrigue and power exchange? What to make of a Gospel story without Jesus in it? How tempting it is just to focus on the joy of worship and give a nice sermon that reminds us to rejoice in the Lord, like David, a nice sermon that will leave us feeling a little bored, comfortable, and essentially unchanged. Yes, yes, I must remember to tap into joy!?!—too easy, my friends, too easy by half.

I must confess, upon reading and reading the lectionary for today (and then re-reading all of 1st Samuel, because I'm a nerd), that I really wished this was a lecture for class I was giving, not a sermon. The academic in me who loves literature had trouble getting over the parallels between 2nd Samuel 6 and Mark 6: the dancing, the tentative kingships, the intrigue; a king entering triumphantly, and scandalously, into his city vs. a non-king holding on to a mere third of his father's territory; a near-naked David frolicking before the Lord vs. a striptease by a stepdaughter. It's hard to draw something challenging or edifying from these passages when all I want to do is explain the history of it all. But I read an exhortation about preaching on Herod Antipas that claimed that if I wimped out as a preacher and avoided talking about power this Sunday, then I should hang up my robes in shame.

So yes, we're going to focus on power today—but in the shape of another p-word, one that is getting used a lot lately, one that has a bit of a 'third-rail' quality to it: privilege. Because at the end of the day, when I read and re-read these passages, and read midrashim about David and Michal, and recalled the sordid family tree of Herod the Great, I came back, again and again, to the women. The women in these stories are typical women in the ancient world: they are acted upon, used as pawns, as entertainment, as bribes. They are profoundly un-free. And yet they love, and plot and plan within their powers, and they hate—they hate deeply those who have cut them, crossed them, wounded and rejected them. The seeds of Michal's despising of David were sown in love; she protected him, saved his life, was ripped away from a more loving husband, and was rejected by him at the end. Herodias' hatred for John the Baptist is grounded in fear—fear of losing what little protection and stability she had.

Alongside these women we must acknowledge the unearned and invisible privilege that cloaked David, Herod, and even John the Baptist, allowing them to use these women as pawns in their political games, or to simply not see them at all, except as violations of law. The lesson from this, I think, will be something along the lines of the mirror Scripture holds up to us, the disclosing of our hearts that can occur if we let it, via these stories. How am I like David—and Herod—in my inability to see that my power often exists at the expense of the powerless? How am I like David, and Herod, in my tendency to see people—particularly certain people groups—as means to ends, not intentionally, but via a kind of blindness?

Let's talk about Michal first. Lordamercy, but I have deep sympathy for Michal. The younger daughter of Saul, from the very beginning she is used as a game piece, as was the custom of the day. Saul loves David, when he's not possessed with the urge to kill him. Jonathan loves David, in ways that should give you pause. Saul promises Merab to David, then retracts that offer, and offers Michal, but at a price. The price of this woman is 100 foreskins of Philistines—truly a dowry to make any woman jealous. To Saul, Michal is bait to get David killed in battle. The trap fails, and in the meantime the bait falls in love with David. (This is one of the only times in Scripture where a woman is said to love a man; notice that there is no mention of the love being reciprocal.) Have you noticed that those who love David often suffer deeply? So Michal is given to David in marriage; she later helps him escape yet another attempt on his life by Saul, risking her own life in the process. David repays this loyalty by taking on several new wives (Abigail in particular is labeled as gorgeous), while Michal (and this is truly messed up) is given by Saul to Paltiel, the son of another king Saul is trying to make nice with. (The Rabbis explain that this was done on the advice of Doeg the Edomite, who argued that since David fled, he was as good as dead and therefore his wife could be given away.) Michal, once again, serves as a pawn in Saul's desperate game. As David gains territory and power after Saul's death, he insists that Michal be returned to him; Paltiel weeps after her. Michal is brought back to her love...

And then we arrive at our story for today. Michal, a princess of the royal court married to the youngest son of a shepherd, witnesses her husband, possibly scantily clad, boogying his way through the streets of Jerusalem like a commoner, or worse. All the women are able to see him in all his glory, and he not only has put on the garb of a priest while king, he's acting like a crazy fool instead of royalty. And she despises him in her heart. How Michal went from love to hate is not hard to grasp, I don't think. The beautiful young man with the lyre has become king like her father, and has done so through political machinations and alliances, through marriages, but unlike her father, also through his charm, a charm that he does not reserve for her—indeed, a charm that he flaunts through the streets. He claims to be dancing before the Lord, and that his pride is worth nothing in comparison to praising God, and I don't doubt that. But David is all too human, and nothing we humans do is pure—which helps explain why he also says, at the end of that speech to Michal (one that reminds her of her place as daughter of the conquered), that the servant girls sure liked the show. Hmmm. So yes, we can say that David models humility in his willingness to praise God and look the fool...but we miss the mirror if we get too caught up in only that aspect. David, like all heroes, has feet of clay. David is heading for a fall, as we know.

And we see the seeds of that fall already. He collects wives wherever he goes; he appreciates the eyes of the servant girls upon him; and he treats his first wife like the pawn she is in the ancient world. (Elna Solvang notes that this is behavior unbecoming an Israelite king—Samuel warns about the perils of kingship and what kings may do. The story seems to try to hide this, but David is engaging in behavior that mirrors Saul's.) David has ascended the throne, for sure. He is beloved of God beyond reason. And perhaps he thinks his humble beginnings offer him protection against the abuse of power and privilege; his story of shepherding, of being the runt of the litter, allows him to ignore

his privilege even as he wields it. Any other man—or woman—dancing in an apron would have been shunned. Any other man would lust after Bathsheba in vain. And so here is our lesson from David, always: in the end, nothing but the grace of God may lift us out of our own selfishness, may give us eyes to see the ways we unthinkingly flaunt our privileges, take them for granted, and fail to see how others don't possess them. Michal represents all women in this time period: even her royal lineage does not ultimately protect her from being a pawn, used, without legitimate agency. Should David have been able to see this? Well, he was a man of his time, and we can surely make a cultural case that there's no way he could see her otherwise. But then again, a prophet saw the seventh son of a shepherd as a king... Those who have (are given) eyes to see, see. How many excuses must we make for David's blindness? How many excuses do we make for our own?

Herod Antipas, now, is another case altogether. Not a king, but obsessed with becoming one. His new wife, Herodias, threatened by this prophet who is calling her out for divorcing her first husband (also her half-uncle), calls for John the Baptist's death. Herod Antipas tries to make a compromise, which rarely works out: instead of killing John outright, he just imprisons him. He has enough spark in him to recognize John's wisdom, but not enough to resist his new wife. Like a court philosopher in a medieval court, John is there to entertain with wise words, words that are then ignored for expediency's sake. Now Herod's court was filled with pagan influence, so when he threw a banquet (for men only, by the by) it was customary to have what we could call prurient entertainment: sexual entertainment to titillate his guests, who are powerful and influential during a time when Herod is desperate too—desperate to hold onto territory and be seen as legitimate.

But boy, has Western culture run with the image of Salome, dancing the dance of the seven veils, a slow striptease where her sexual power undoes her stepfather, to the point of dooming himself. Salome, in paintings, plays, and songs by U2, is a femme fatale who brings men to their knees and destroys them. What a funny thing to do to a story about a young girl forced to dance lasciviously for a bunch of old men. How amazing that our culture turns a situation of desperation and forced performance into one where the woman is powerful and the men victims! Yes, John the Baptist *is* a victim...but all too often our culture makes out Herod and his audience to be victims! In any case, Herodias uses this forced performance as an opportunity to silence a dangerous critic, a man whom her new husband is far too fond of. It's vicious, and understandable, as she fights to hold onto her place. Salome, this time, is the pawn in the game, trapped in the power dynamics of her mother and new stepfather. Like Michal, she is used as a trap by her parent to secure power.

And yet Herod, we see, is haunted by his decision. Similar to the telltale heart of Poe, when he hears of a new prophet making the rounds, what does he assume?—that it is John, back from the dead, raised up to torment him. I feel sorry for Herod at this point; that same spark in him that recognized Truth in John's utterances is still alive, still quickened with guilt, such that he is convinced he's being, essentially, haunted.

What to conclude from this hot mess of crazy? Both the Gospel story and the 2nd Samuel passage portray the bloody messiness that is human life, in this all too human world. We may dance—but mourning may follow dancing, tears and blood follow joy. Our dance is never wholly pure, nor our motives. I think we're called to do two things when faced with these stories. First, we are to recognize ourselves in the powerful: in David, beloved yet blind, whose worship is not as pure as we think; in Herod, able to hear words of truth but unable to act on them, because of what it would cost him. And second, we are called to get new eyes to see, and to *act* upon our new vision. Both of these men were caught up in the culture of their times, unable to truly see the human beings in front of them clearly; they were unable to see the privilege that they took for granted as their natural right as men. This is that mirror I mentioned at the beginning of this weird lecture/sermon. How powerful are *we*, really? How often do we pretend we're not—because it's easier than shouldering the burden, because it makes us uncomfortable—the increased responsibility that comes with privilege? How often do we pull a Herod and listen to warnings and wisdom, but resist applying them in our lives—because it's too hard, too threatening to our comfortable status quo? How many of us are willing to risk our lives to speak truth to power—even if it is only speaking truth to ourselves?

Here's another vision to serve as antidote to Herod. The story of Herod is preceded by two tales of Jesus healing women: of his power going out to an unclean, lowest of the low, hemorrhaging woman; and of healing a young girl, raising her from the dead (touching a corpse). Contrast Jesus with both David and Herod, and we start to see how much of ourselves is reflected in those two gentleman rather than our Lord and Savior. For Jesus is not Elijah, nor even John the Baptist. He is the one who humbles himself not through showy shenanigans, but really and truly, by being God-with-us. He is the one who doesn't just have eyes to see and ears to hear, but *acts* in radical compassion, shunning privilege and power in this world for the sake of every single one of us. I like to think that Jesus would have nothing but compassion toward poor, twisted Michal and Herodias, nothing but friendship for poor, objectified Salome. Let us pray not only to have the joy of David, but also the eyes to see our own power, the strength to restrain its use, the eyes to see those made pawns in the political games of our own time, and the wisdom and humility to walk with them, rather than cling to our own comfort and expediency. Amen.