

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

2 Samuel 6:1-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

How many of you recall the movie “Footloose”? Big city kid moves to small town America; he finds that the pastor and de facto leader has convinced the town to ban ... dancing. Cue 80’s musical sequences, a game of chicken on tractors, etc. Near the end of the movie, when Kevin Bacon is making his impassioned plea to allow dancing, he reads our Old Testament passage, “And David danced.” Which just goes to show you that proof-texting works. Amen. (Kidding.) But often we do the same thing with this passage—we tend to be on David’s side. We fall for the propaganda that tells us how joyful and beloved he is, how un-encumbered. I’m gonna mess with that interpretation.

There’s another dance in our lectionary this morning, however. And like David’s dance, this one gets mis-interpreted too. Herodias/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 ‘dirty’ 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!

What is it about us that makes us ignore the details of these stories, to flatten out the tensions and the wrongness and make it all so simple? David’s dance is not just one of joyful praise. And for the love, Salome’s dance is not some power move by a femme fatale! Unlike “Footloose,” the Bible is not a nice movie with a soundtrack that wraps up neatly in an hour and a half.

So: 2 kings. 2 daughters. 2 dances. Love, hate, fear. Let’s resist the easy plot line and instead think about this: David’s dance is the sexy one.

David at this point in the story is still the golden child—the popular kid. Think back to high school, middle school, elementary school (kids—just think of now). You know that kid, the one everyone seems to like no matter what? The one who seems to get As without effort; who is great at sports/drama; the one the teachers love. That’s David. David is so ‘golden’ that he can do something scandalous—like dance mostly naked through the streets!—and people will just love him more! ANNOYING. It doesn’t matter that he treats Michal like dirt; it doesn’t matter that he uses women as political pawns; it doesn’t matter WHAT he does. The people love him anyway. David even says, at the end of his speech to Michal (one that reminds her of her place as daughter of the conquered), that the servant girls sure liked the show. This was NOT just a dance of worshipful joy. This was a dance of the ego. No wonder Michal despises him in her heart. Love can turn to hate when the person one loves doesn’t see you as anything more than a tool, something to be used and cast aside.

What can we learn from David’s dance?

We can learn to resist the glamour of popularity. Sometimes the emperor has no clothes—and knows it!—and assumes people will just go along with it. Sometimes speaking truth to power means pointing out the obvious and refusing the glamour. Sometimes we get blinded by our own

popularity into thinking we can do no wrong. And sometimes our ego makes us treat people like tools. But mostly what I worry about in our day and age is resisting the glamour of power—of shaking off the hypnosis that comes with being told, over and over, that scandalous behavior is just fine. That casual cruelty is fine. That power excuses everything. 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. We need eyes to see our own sin—but also eyes to see the sin of our leaders, and to call them out.

What can we learn from Salome's dance?

To learn from Salome's dance, we need to look at the man (and woman) who put her in this terrible position: her stepfather, Herod Antipas, and her mother, Herodias.

Herod Antipas, unlike David, is not a true king, but he is obsessed with becoming one. He has enough spark in him to recognize John the Baptist's wisdom, **but not enough to resist his own ambitions**. Like a court philosopher in a medieval court, John is there to entertain with wise words, words that are then ignored because they don't support what Herod desperately WANTS. Herod's court was filled with pagan influence, and so when he threw a banquet (for men only, by the by) it was customary to have what we could call naughty entertainment: sexual entertainment to stir up his guests, who are powerful and influential during a time when Herod is desperate to hold onto territory and be seen as legitimate.

So he invites some powerful men over for a party, and he/Herodias force Salome to, essentially, strip for them. Herodias, filled with fear that she will lose her precarious position, forces her own daughter to strip, and then to ask for the head of John the Baptist. 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 is a 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 tale-tell 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.

What options did Herod have? It's so easy, from our vantage point, to name them: listen to John. Maybe don't kill him. Maybe temper your ambition with, I don't know, some moral fiber. And yet, in ways big and small, how often do we take the easy route, let the pressure of others make our decisions for us? How often, in our need to please, do we let someone be humiliated? How often do we assume the role of the bystander?—which is what Herod does here. He's stinking 'king' ...yet he a) lets his stepdaughter be used as entertainment for gross men, and b) lets a prophet be killed to appease his wife. If a king can't resist, how can we? How can we call out the cruel joke, the racist comment? How can we resist being bystanders?

Both the Gospel story and the 2 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 are 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. **We are caught up in our culture too. To think otherwise is folly.**

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 then chicken out, turn our backs, tell ourselves it's fine...it's all gonna work out...everything is fine. **How many of us are willing to risk our lives to speak truth to power?**

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 to both David and Herod, and we start to see how much of ourselves is reflected in those two gentlemen 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 to have 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 expedience.

Amen.