

Bad Birthday Party

Mark 6:14-29 | 7/15/2018

Who doesn't love a birthday party? Kids certainly love them, especially if they're the birthday boy or girl. Friends come bearing gifts, there's cake and ice cream, and these days maybe even an outing to a local amusement park or someplace else where kids can run wild.

For parents, birthday parties can often be stressful and full of the kind of intrigue and drama that accompany the lives of wee ones. Witness some of these horror stories from birthday parties gone bad:

- + A family decided to throw their 8-year-old daughter a surprise party, only to see her burst into tears when everyone yelled "Surprise." She sniffed that surprise parties "made her heart hurt."
- + One party hired a clown to entertain a bunch of 5-year-olds, only to discover that half the kids screamed in terror when they saw him. The parents had to ask the clown to leave. We get it: clowns can be creepy. Except of course for Bingo and Baby Clown, clowns to the royal family of Saudi Arabia, also known as Lynn and Ashley.
- + Another family went all out and spared no expense to create the birthday party of the century, except only one guest showed up. Turns out that the birthday girl's class had conspired not to go because she had made other kids feel bad if they didn't have nice things. The only kid who showed up did so because he felt bad for her.

No doubt these families still tell the stories (and carry the scars) of these birthday party disasters.

All of these, of course, pale in comparison to what has to be the worst birthday party in the history of birthdays. Parents and little ones may have lost their minds at the ones I've mentioned, but no one lost his or her head. That ultimate bad party took place at the infamous birthday bash thrown by Herod Antipas.

The story is told as a flashback in Mark's gospel. Once upon a time, a certain king -- his name was Herod Antipas -- became aware of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who was performing all sorts of miracles. King Herod wasn't technically a king but a *tetrarch* or Roman-appointed governor of the territory of Galilee and Perea. His father, Herod the Great, was called a king, but he, too, was really one in name only, being a client of Emperor Augustus at the time Jesus was born.

Rumors about this Jesus had been circulating and people speculated about who he was. Some thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, others Elijah and still others thought he was one of the prophets (vv. 14-15). Notice that these are the same rumors Jesus' own disciples mentioned when he would later ask, "Who do people say that I am?" (8:27-30). The king was convinced that only one of those rumors could be true -- that John the Baptist, the prophet whom he had both feared and revered, had come back from the dead (6:16).

This is where Mark gives us the party flashback. King Herod had arrested John and put him in prison because the prophet had condemned the king's marriage to the queen -- who happened to be his brother's ex-wife. The king saw himself as a sort of modern messiah, working, as he was, on the temple in Jerusalem as his father had done. John attacked that line of thinking by saying in effect that no real messiah would do the kinds of shameful things that Antipas had done.

And what had Antipas done? He had fallen in love, or in lust, with his niece, Herodias, who was the wife of his half-brother Philip. They'd met around A.D. 29 when the king visited his Philip on the way to Rome. As for the niece, the idea of becoming the wife of a tetrarch appealed to her, and she agreed to marry him if Antipas got a divorce from his first wife. So he did. And so she did. Herodias divorced Philip and moved into the king's palace where they hoped to live happily ever after.

But not only was this marriage a political problem, it was also a major violation of Jewish law which forbade marriage to a brother's wife unless it was to raise a deceased brother's children. In this case, Philip was not only alive, but he and Herodias had a daughter together.

Herodias saw John the Baptist as a threat wanted him dead and out of the way (Mark 6:19). The king, on the other hand, feared and protected John because he was a holy man and he liked his preaching even if he didn't quite get it (v. 20).

The king should have been more than "perplexed" at what John was preaching. John was proclaiming nothing less than the coming of the real messiah (1:7-8). The kind of kingdom and power that Antipas desired was nothing compared to the one who would usher in the kingdom of God. The king would be confused about Jesus until the end. He never realized that the one who wore the crown of thorns was the real royalty.

When the king's birthday rolled around, he decided to throw a party for himself and invite the rich and powerful members of his court. Jews generally didn't celebrate birthdays, but the Romans and Greeks did and the king, being an aficionado of all things Roman, wanted to party down.

The parties of the Herodian court were legendary for their excesses, and we can be sure that King Herod Antipas indulged in more than a few glasses from the punch bowl. Herodias, perhaps seeing her chance to influence her new husband and bump off that annoying prophet, had her daughter dance for her new husband.

Loosened up and lusty from partying, Antipas went gaga over his stepdaughter (another no-no) and made a rash oath that he would give her anything she wanted. When the daughter asked her mom, the nasty queen was ready with the request: "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (v. 25). Not exactly cake and ice cream.

The king was now trapped by his own words. Not wanting to lose face in front of the members of his court, he reluctantly ordered the prophet's head served up on a plate. The girl gave it to her mother, as though she were giving her mother a birthday present (vv. 26-28). John's disciples came to claim his body and laid it in a tomb -- a reminder that death is usually the party favor for those who speak truth to power.

It's interesting that Mark spends more ink on this story than others we might expect. In his rapid-fire telling of the gospel story, he doesn't give us any account of Jesus' birth and only a few slight details on his baptism by John, his journey into the wilderness, and little of the teachings about which we read in the other gospels.

This story looms large, however, and perhaps it's because Mark wants us to recognize that (1) *following the true king is a costly business*. Giving our allegiance to him will put us sideways with the political and social forces that seem to govern our world. Speaking the truth often results in being ignored and pushed aside at best and, at worst, may put us on a cross. That's where the true messiah will go, and he doesn't hesitate to tell us that we're odds-on favorites to join him there (8:34).

This is a theme that Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. There, he reminds us that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

But this odd story in the gospel of Mark also reminds us that (2) *we are invited to a different sort of party*. Immediately after this horrific story about a party gone wrong, Mark offers another party story where things go better than anyone could have imagined. Jesus will feed more than 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish -- not exactly a birthday party menu, but far more nourishing (6:30-44)!

In contrast, King Herod Antipas threw a party in honor of himself and his own birth, with an exclusive guest list restricted to the rich and powerful, and in his drunken lust condemned a holy man to death.

Neither Mark nor Jesus seem to care about the real messiah's birthday, and yet Jesus threw a party for the poor and hungry out of compassion and brought life to people in need. The question Mark asks is (3), "*Which king do you want to follow, and which party do you want to be part of in the end?*"

In A.D. 36, King Aretas (the father of King Herod's first wife) attacked and defeated Herod's army. The Jews were elated, considering this to be divine punishment for beheading John the Baptist.

In the year 39, Herodias goaded her husband to claim the title of a real king for himself, urging him to go to Rome to appeal to the new Emperor Caligula. Instead of becoming king, Herod and Herodias were banished to the region of Gaul (modern-day France) and his territory was given to Herod Agrippa. I'm guessing Herod Antipas had no more parties after that.

John's death foreshadowed the death of Jesus who, like John, had spoken truth to power. The result is the same. Death. But we know that wasn't the end of the story. The party was just getting started, and it's still going on.

And if you're not at this party, it's not because you haven't been invited. Jesus invites you to the party. Today would a good day to accept the invitation.

Pastor Keith