

Mark 6:14-29

Birthdays are usually happy occasions...times for singing, and blowing out candles, and eating cake and ice cream, and unwrapping presents. But on Herod's birthday it was a time for lust, adultery, and murder. This story in St. Mark sounds like it belongs in the pages of a racy romance novel, or in the script of an R-rated Hollywood movie. But here it is within the Gospel account of our Lord right smack in the middle of the stories of His teachings and miracles.

Herod was living in sin with his sister-in-law Herodias, and John the Baptist was not afraid to tell him so. John spoke God's Word truthfully, but Herodias was angry at him, so Herod locked him up in prison. But this was not good enough for Herodias. She wanted him dead. So she devised an evil plan. On Herod's birthday her daughter danced for Herod and for all the important men who were gathered for his feast. This was no ballet dance. It was not some sweet little heel-clicking routine performed by a young girl. It was an erotic, lustful dance designed to accomplish one thing--put Herod into such a state of frenzy that he would boastfully and stupidly make an oath of generosity. It worked. Herod promised the daughter of Herodias anything up to half of his kingdom. Her mother commanded her, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist!" She went back to Herod with this request and that night, while men were singing, "Happy Birthday!" blood flowed in John's prison cell.

Now Herod might claim that he had been tricked; that Herodias tempted him with her daughter into making a promise which cost John his head. But he admits in verse 16, "I beheaded John the Baptist." This is not to say that he was repentant of his sin, but it is more than our first parents were willing to admit. They, too, were tricked...by a snake...by cunning Satan. His evil plan was somewhat identical to the plan of Herodias. She wanted John beheaded. Satan wanted God's creation beheaded. Herodias tricked Herod, and Satan tricked Adam and Eve. When they took a bite of the fruit that he tempted them with, sin's axe flew and cut off their head!

Did you ever see a chicken with its head cut off? It runs around wildly for a few minutes, as if it's looking for its head, and then it plops onto the ground, dead. That was Adam and Eve. When they sinned, they were cut off from God. They were dead but didn't know it. They ran around the Garden, not looking for their head, but trying to hide from God; and sooner or later they, and all of their children, would plop over and die eternally in hell.

And that's how you and I were born into this world. As children of Adam and Eve, we were born without a head. "Now pastor," you may be thinking, "You're wrong here. We were all born with a head. It even came out first. If we were born without a head, we would all be dead." And so we were. We were born "Dead in our trespasses and sins," writes the Apostle. We may be born with a human head, but we are born dead in sin because we are born cut off from our true Head who is Christ.

And just like Adam and Eve, we run around in life trying to hide from our true Head. When you children disobey your parents, you are cutting God off as your Head. He has placed your parents over you to be your head in His place. But when children, or any of us despise authority, and thus disobey the head over us, like Herodias, we are demanding God's head on a platter.

When people of the world refuse to hear the words of God, it is because they are rejecting their Head. Herodias wanted John's head cut off because he spoke the Word of God truthfully. People today want to live their sinful lives and they do not, like Herodias, want to hear what God says about

it. So by staying away from church, by staying away from the preaching and teaching of God's Word they, like Herodias, are putting God's head on a platter.

And don't we all do this to some extent? We like being our own head. We want to live our life our way, not God's way. So like Herodias, we put God's head on a platter and live life according to our will, our standards, our commandments, and not His. But if God is not our head, we will die. We may run around day after day, week after week, year after year through life, but eventually the chicken will fall to the ground. If you have been putting God's head on a platter, repent! If you have been cutting off His authority over you, His words from your life, repent now before it is too late.

Herodias may have thought that when John was beheaded, that would be the end of it. No more guilt, no more anger, no more fear of punishment, no more preaching. But after John came Jesus...preaching and teaching in the same way that John had...calling sinners to repentance. And Jesus, too, they arrested; and like John, they cut Him off from the land of the living, nailing Him to a tree. But the Head would not stay dead. On the third day He rose again. And now He, the Head of His church, gives life to His body.

You are that body. You are His church. Jesus is your Head placed upon you in your baptism. And the life He now lives, He gives to you so that you live with Him and under Him in His kingdom. Although you and I have rejected Him as our Head by our sinful lives, He forgives you. Though we day after day continue to rebel against His words for us, thus placing His head on a platter, He continues to restore you as His body under Him through His words of absolution and His sacrament of grace.

Jesus is not an angry Head. He is not a revengeful Head. He, as your Head, does not seek your destruction. But as He came looking for Adam and Eve to restore them, so He comes seeking you in His words of mercy, that through such words He restores you as His precious body. He puts His life back into you. He gives peace to your heart and hope to your eternal soul. The words He gives you today restore Him to His rightful place as your Head, for His words of grace forgive your sins and put faith into your heart.

Do you have a friend or loved one who is still running around like a headless chicken? I have such dear ones and I'm sure you do too...friends and loved ones who have little or no regard for the hearing of God's Word...friends and loved ones who have placed their Savior's head on a platter because they are living their life apart from Him. Let us not be selfish with what we have been given. Christ has covered you as your forgiving Head, and He deeply desires to restore them also under His headship. Can you invite them? Can you lead them? Can you bring God's Word to them? Without Christ as their Head, our friends and loved ones may run for a while through life, but sooner or later they will fall to the ground and die. We can give them Jesus today. We can restore them to that place under their merciful Head as God works in and through us.

John's head, to this day, is cut off from his body. Herodias made certain of that. But your Head is not cut off. Jesus is your Head. You are His body. He has restored you. He forgives you. And through you He now will work to forgive and restore lost sinners near and dear to you. Amen.