

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 14:1-14

Sermon Title: "The Hard Soil of Insensitivity and Egotism" (A Journey through Matthew)

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If Herod hadn't been a king... If Herod had been born just like any one of us: lived in an average house with one or two cars in the driveway, went to a normal public school and state university, and got a job that paid a decent wage: If Herod had been like us, makes you wonder if his life would have turned out better.

They say you cannot choose which family you are born into. Herod had no choice from the start. His father was Herod the Great.¹ He named himself the king of the Jews, and he served as a governor of Rome in the region of Galilee for 25 years. Herod the Great stood against the powerful Sanhedrin, the Jewish senate, and took enormous political power away from them. He then rebuilt Galilee and Samaria and Judea in his own image, constructing buildings and temples and monuments of his greatness. His crowning achievement was the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Herod the Great didn't see the thing completed in his lifetime, and work was still going on

¹ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, cf. 385.

during the time of Jesus Christ.

So this Herod, the one we read about in Matthew 14, has large shoes to fill. As the next ruler of Galilee, he has the Temple in Jerusalem to complete. He has the Jewish Sanhedrin to keep in the palm of his hand. He has his other brothers to impress, because they are kings ruling other regions next to his. He has the emperor of Rome to impress, so he may keep his job. This King Herod observed what his great father did before him, just like the current ruler of North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, did with his own father: suppress the people, throw his political weight around, never compromise, never give in.

Believe it or not, I used to think that when a person came into a large amount of money, he or she would become a more accountable person. Take an athlete who makes it to the big time, for example. I used to believe the money he was earning would make him more responsible toward others. Somehow having all that wealth makes you more alert, more sensible, and more mature. I really used to think that. I had sports heroes when I was a child – the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Pittsburgh Penguins – but knew nothing about their personal lives. Maybe I was too young to know or too young to

care. I watched them on the field or in the rink, and I cheered them on, and I believed that when they left the game that somehow they were just as responsible, just as mature, as my father.

And then I began to hear about players getting arrested for DUIs and wife/girlfriend battery and statutory rape. Players were found at the club around three in the morning, illegally carrying a concealed weapon. They were taking all sorts of drugs and alcohol and performance enhancing pills. Wasn't all that money supposed to make them responsible? I would hope to be very responsible, especially if I had one or two million in my bank account. Not everybody is. 78 percent of football players go bankrupt. 60 percent of basketball players go broke, even though they were paid millions of dollars per year.² They don't know what to do with all that money at the ages of 20 and 30. It seems the money doesn't make them responsible but reckless and immature and lost.

Look at King Herod in Matthew 14. Look at all the wealth surrounding him. Look at the immense power he holds in his hand. Look at the great family reputation of being arrogant and ruthless, a tradition that he has to uphold.

² <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2012/10/02/162162226/espns-broke-looks-at-the-many-ways-athletes-lose-their-money>.

And then John the Baptist shows up. John the Baptist “gets all up in” Herod’s business, as the kids would say today. He says that Herod has sinned, sinned big time. “It is unlawful for you to marry your brother’s wife.”³ Herod fell in love with Herodias, who was already married to Philip, Herod’s brother and a king of some other region. Herod divorces his own wife and replaces her with Herodias, and John the Baptist calls this unlawful.⁴ Unlawful to whom? Isn’t Herod the king with absolute power over the law? Herod can make up whatever law he wants. If his brother Philip is sour about it, they can fight about it as brothers or as kings. Set up their armies like pieces on a Stratego board and fight it out. Unlawful to whom?

John the Baptist is trying to help King Herod understand what his arrogance and greed and selfishness has turned him into. God doesn’t want us acting this way. This is not how we’ve been created: immature, irresponsible, careless. We might not think it is our business, when it comes to what is lawful or unlawful between kings and queens; let them figure it out. It still matters to God, though. God has given certain people the ability to lead, and they should lead with great humility and thoughtfulness. Be the person a Prime Minister or a President, be the person a CEO

³ Matthew 14:4.

⁴ *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, cf. 1600.

or manager. We are all accountable to God, because God gives us all certain abilities, certain powers so to speak, to carry out to God's glory. Be we a teacher or pastor, be we a mother or father, be we an employee or boss, whatever we may be, we do the job with humility and care and even thanksgiving to God.

Herod will hear none of what John the Baptist has to offer. He arrests John, virtually silences him for speaking out. Herod wants to do what he pleases him.

Reputation can do that to a person. Give a person a certain reputation, and they run with it, become the big man or a diva with it. A little bit of money can do that to anyone, make them think they can do as they please. A little fame, a little popularity, a whole bunch of Likes on Facebook, a large number of hits on the YouTube video: anything can make us lose focus and turn us into conceited jerks.

Herod takes his cockiness to a whole other level. During his birthday celebration, he gets carried away with the festivities. The wine is flowing copiously, the people are loosey-goosey, and the entire atmosphere has turned sensual. Herodias's daughter, Philip's daughter, decides to dance. She moves as fluidly as water, and Matthew's Gospel tells us that Herod is pleased. He is "undone by his own sensuality."

Overcome by the moment, and because he is a big shot anyhow and it is *his* birthday, “he plunges again into excess.”⁵ He promises to give anything to Herodias’s daughter that she wants. Anything. Herod isn’t thinking. He is in love with the girl, with himself, with the party, with his comfortable lifestyle. Herodias and her daughter confer, and they request the head of John the Baptist. Silence the great prophet forever.

Then, we get a bit of a shock. We read that Herod is sorry. “The king is grieved,” Matthew tells us. What is this? Has Herod come to his senses and had a spark of morality enter his brain? Is he actually thinking about his destructive actions? Is he actually feeling guilty for them? People who have become arrogant with what they have are able to gain a sense of humanity. Their eyes can open just a bit, so that they can see there are others standing around them. They are not the center of attention. God is the center. The people around us are our ministry.

But the moment quickly disappears. The bungee cord of selfishness snaps Herod back, and he remembers how politically powerful he is. He remembers the cruel way he has controlled and manipulated people. He remembers his heritage of

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, 524.

uncompromising kings. He looks at the beautiful girl, and his beautiful “wife,” and his beautiful guests, and chooses to kill the prophet.

In the previous chapter, in Matthew 13, Jesus told a parable about seeds. The parable involved a farmer spreading seeds on four different types of ground. Only the one type of ground, the rich soil, was able to absorb the seed and welcome it to grow. The thorny and rocky soil would only accept the seed for a moment, but then the difficulties of life – tribulation, worries, stresses – would crush any possibility for the seed to do any good. The remaining soil, the hard soil, wouldn’t accept the seed at all. It was marched over so many times that the earth was too hard to allow anything to grow on it.

King Herod is that hard soil.⁶ He is so hard that he is more like the asphalt that covers our parking lot outside. His greed, his arrogance, his cruelty, his legacy have marched over him for so long, crushed him down with intense pressure like a trash compactor, hardening his heart and his brain. There is no good soil left in him for anything to grow. When John the Baptist spreads the seeds of God’s word over him, hoping he might understand how immortally he

⁶ Ibid.

has acted, the birds of sensuality swooped down and snatched it. The word of God is gone. Herod's life is gone.

The next thing we know, in Matthew 14, is that Jesus hears the news, and he chooses travel to a solitary place for a time. We don't know what he did in that quiet place. He must have mourned John's death; he was his cousin. He had to have shed a tear for the man who was a family member, who prepared the path for his ministry, who knew the word of God through and through and died for it. I personally wonder if Jesus also mourned the death of three other people: King Herod, Herodias, and Herodias's daughter. They were spiritually dead. They didn't care what others thought, just so long as they got their own way. It might have been a small victory to kill John and parade his head before others. They must have had a big laugh over that. The prophet is now dead, and we don't have to hear the good-two-shoes warning us of our sin. It might have been a small victory to get rid of him, but they had already lost the battle for life. They were already dead, and they didn't know it.

But Jesus would not stay in solitary for long. He is soon surrounded by people who want to know more

about him. There are still a great number of people, like us, who want to be the rich soil. They want to hear God's words. They want to feel Jesus' touch. They want the Holy Spirit filling them up and causing them to love and serve with joy.

Jesus does not ignore those people. He is "moved with compassion for them," meaning that deep with his guts he could feel overwhelming love and encouragement for them. Jesus has so much compassion for his people, so much care, so much interest in seeing that his people receive what they need. Jesus is motivated to reach out and heal. Turn their thorny and rocky soil into rich soil. Stop a person's greed and arrogance and cruelty from marching all over them. There are people whose lives need to be changed, and Jesus is more than willing to spread the word and see it grow.

Assurance of Pardon:

Listen to this Good News: “If we claim that we’re free from sin, we’re only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is [absolute] nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins – [be honest and open about them] – God won’t let us down. God will forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing.” Since we confessed our sins, God will forgive us through his Son Jesus Christ and bring us into the light of his salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.