

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
July 22, 2012  
©2012

## Dueling Dinners: A Tale of Two Feasts

From Mark 6 adapted from the New Revised Standard Version  
Herod. . . had sent men who arrested John [the Baptist], bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." . . . She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the Baptist." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier... [who] beheaded [John], brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. . . . When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. [Later] the apostles gathered around Jesus. . . . He said to them, "Come away to the desert all by yourselves and rest a while," for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desert place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? . . . They said, "Five [loaves], and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to lie down in groups on the green grass. . . . Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled. . . . Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand.

Barbara's and my youngest daughter not long ago said to me "*Sometimes it stinks having to be a grownup.*" Indeed. And while she meant the garden-variety frustrations of dealing with cars that break down and insurance choices and those

hundred other details creep into our lives as we move from adolescence to adulthood, she could have also well-meant the fact that much as we might try to protect our children from it, there will be days that are filled – as was this past Friday – with horror sometimes. There will be days when we weep with frustration and anger and raw pain. And, even more, there will be those days when both good and evil, triumph and tears, laughter and loss, will all get mixed in together, will follow one another and even intersect. Ambiguity and ambivalence and life's being a swirling mixture marks what it means to live. And that can be both profoundly painful and yet wondrously grace-filled - sometimes all in the same day, even the same hour.

I believe that double-sidedness of life may well be the reason that Mark made sure that the telling of these two stories about two feasts, two dinners, are juxtaposed in his rendering of the life of Jesus. For these two stories indeed illustrate the complexity, the ambiguity, the “two-sidedness” of life – and at the same time powerfully proclaim that God's grace will in the end prevail. For it is crucial, I think, in order for us to rightly understand that the second story, the story of *Jesus'* feast that it be read juxtaposed with the first story, the story *Herod's* feast, Herod's dinner. Because the **contrast** between the two feasts, the two dinners, couldn't be more striking – and it is from those contrasts that we learn and re-learn something essential about the Good News of the Gospel.

So let's look at these contrasts. But first a word about the story of the death of John the Baptist. This is not a G-rated story. Did you catch the details? King Herod was taken with his brother's wife, Herodias. And apparently she was just as taken with him. Herod was so taken with her that he married her and they began living together – notwithstanding the fact that she was still married to his brother! This had apparently been going on for quite awhile, so long that in fact Herod and Herodias – his sister-in-law, remember – had a daughter together who is also named, confusingly, Herodias,

and who is old enough to dance at the party entertaining the men who were gathered there and old enough to connive with her mother to kill John the Baptist. John had been imprisoned by Herod, but Herod had not had him executed – apparently Herod’s conscience was guilty enough that he would listen to John’s condemnation of his behavior as the sort of cost for doing it (just as some folks you or I know feel like that if they acknowledge their sins and shortcomings that substitutes for actually **doing** something about them). But Herodias – the mother – was angry that John still had Herod’s ear and when Herod, in a fit of exuberance – probably having had a few too many cups of wine – told his daughter he’d give her anything she wanted and her mother told her to ask to have John the Baptist executed. And so it was done.

So that’s the terrible context amidst which Herod gave *his* dinner party. Let us dig a little more deeply so that we can indeed contrast that party with the one that Jesus throws in the second half of the scripture for today. Now, the description of Herod’s party moves so quickly we’re apt to miss it. Hear it again: *“Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.”* I want to note four things about **Herod’s** dinner, four things that will be important when we look at **Jesus’** dinner where the 5000 were fed. First, notice who the party was for: Herod. Herod gave the party for himself, to honor himself. And because he was King, after all, his guests really didn’t have much choice about coming or not coming. It’s neither wise nor prudent to refuse the King’s “invitation.” But more importantly, it is almost as if Herod knew that unless he honored himself, his party wouldn’t even have filled the royal garage. So that’s the first point: Herod’s “hospitality” honors himself. He puts his resources and his energy into magnifying himself.

Second, and relatedly, notice who gets invited to the party: Herod’s “courtiers and officers and... leaders of Galilee.” Herod’s dinner was for the most powerful in the land – the military men who commanded power, the palace bureaucrats who can make

something happen or keep it from ever happening, the rich landowners. And they were all **men**. The only role that women have at Herod's party is as servants or as dancing girls or as prostitutes. As servants, they are the invisible people, and as the entertainment they are used to satisfy the men present. Third, *how* do they eat? Well, we know from the customs of the day that at such a royal dinner everyone laid down to eat; in fact, Herod's palace, like other palaces of the day, had a "party room" built into it with many couches and the sign of your status was how much your couch reclined and how near your couch was to the Kings's couch. So, in short, this is not a dinner where it's ya'll come; no, it's a very careful and contrived jockeying for and display of power.

Finally, notice where this dinner party takes place: In an opulent palace. And this is the palace that has been paid for by an enormous tax rate on the ordinary folks in the Kingdom, who would never be invited to the party except as servants or prostitutes. In fact, in Herod's day, there was not one but three separate taxes on the people designed solely to finance his lifestyle. So when the gospels talk about "the poor," this is not simply a spiritual term, it is a real-life description of real-live poverty bordering on destitution due to the venality of their colonial rulers. And in such a context, it is no wonder that Jesus had so many things to say about "the poor" and about the righteous and sinful uses of money.

But now for the other dinner part of the story, Jesus' feeding of the 5000. That part of the story tells us that Jesus' disciples first go and retrieve and bury John the Baptist's body. And then utterly spent and saddened, they joined Jesus in getting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee to go across to a desert place where they might re-group and be renewed. But when they arrived on the other shore, they found that the solitude that they had hoped for was not to be – hordes of people had come to meet Jesus' boat. For they too had no doubt heard of what had happened to John the Baptist, and,

as with any people in a time of deep grief, they wanted to be together and they wanted to try to take comfort from someone wise. And that is precisely where these two feasts get linked together in the story for today; that linkage can be seen in what Jesus says upon seeing this crowd: *“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd....”* Jesus saw the ones who were the poor, the ones who had been taxed to the point of destitution to make possible Herod’s indulgences, the ones who had seen their beloved John the Baptist executed on the whim of a jealous mistress, the ones who were invisible in that palace and whose only role was to serve a corrupt ruler. And so Jesus, the one who knows that sheep need a shepherd to guide them and comfort them and feed them does just that. And then he throws his own dinner for them, and the contrast with Herod’s dinner, Herod’s self-indulgent feast, couldn’t be more striking.

First, notice where they are. They are in a **desert**. And by that detail we are meant to be reminded that so often in the Biblical tradition it is indeed the desert where renewal has come. Jesus himself began his ministry after 40 days in the desert; the prophet Isaiah announced the end of the Babylonian exile by saying the deserts would bloom; and the desert is the place where the Hebrew people were first fed by the hand of a gracious God in their flight from Egypt. Jesus and the crowd are **not** in a palace paid for by the work of other people; they are in a desert – the place where God is even when times are hard, the place where renewal can come forth. And then, there in the desert, in response to the disciples seemingly sensible suggestion to send the hungry crowd away to buy their own food, Jesus says “no” – not only is there no food to be had nearby, but these are the poorest of the poor and they should not be put off with platitudes.

Second, notice **how** they eat. The earliest translations say that Jesus told the disciples to tell the people to “lie down.” Later translations have often changed that to

“sit down” because we no longer know the context of Roman banquets where indeed people laid down to eat. But it’s indeed *lie down* in our story. And by this Jesus is making a point: these poor ones, these ones who are so often so invisible and even abused by the world and its principalities and powers, are in fact the ones that **God** honors. At **Jesus’** dinners, it is not the powerful, not the courtiers and the bureaucrats and the commanders who are the honored guests, but the people of God. And, likewise, third, notice who serves them. The **disciples** serve the crowd. As Professor Clark Williamson says of this story, “[The disciples] did the work that slaves, women, and the other nobodies did at [Herod’s] banquet. At **Jesus’** banquet, the nobodies and the women were served.”<sup>1</sup>

And, finally, who is the party for? In **Herod’s** case, his party was thrown in honor of himself. But Jesus’ party, Jesus’ feast, is not in his own honor; it is in honor of those whom God loves, and at this party the bounty of God is offered for everyone and in that bounty is always life and never, unlike in the halls of Herod, death. Again, hear what Professor Williamson says here about this overwhelming abundance of food that comes from a few loaves and fishes: “*The exuberant grace of God is symbolically witnessed to with this excess of bread and fish, the staff of life and well-being. **Jesus’** dinner ends not with death, but the with means of life and well-being overflowing.*”<sup>2</sup> God is always the God of life, not death; God is always at work to bring life, not death.

So what does all of this have to do with us, 20 centuries removed from these two dinner parties? Let me offer these thoughts:

First, let us not ever waver in thinking that God is always good. That doesn’t

---

<sup>1</sup>Clark Williamson, “Three Kings, Three Kingdoms, and Three Banquets,” (Chicago: The Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago Annual Report 2006-06, 2006), page 4. **Emphasis mine.** I am deeply indebted in this whole sermon to Professor Williamson’s approach and exegesis of this text.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., **emphas mine**

mean that bad things, even awful things, don't happen; they do. We sadly saw that yet again in Friday's horrors in Aurora. But let us never, ever find ourselves inadvertently thinking that they are of God, that God wants them, or God has done them to us or those we love. No, God is always a God who works even in the midst of bad things – of unfair deaths and of hurts and of social systems that do injustice – to seek always to bring life and hope.

Second, it may be that you have found yourself lately in your own desert place, a place that is hard and hurting. The story of Jesus' dinner in the desert can serve to remind you that sometimes it is in fact precisely from the desert that transformation and hope can come. Jesus has not taken you there, but Jesus is always there with you, helping you find the ways and means to new life, new hope, new possibilities. Listen for Jesus' voice and look for the ways that Jesus is indeed trying to feed you in that place.

Third, in all of our feasts on this day or any day let us always remember that Jesus would honor and bless and feed those who do not have enough, who are hurting. The parties that we throw are never only for us, they are also for those who are invisible and who may not even know that there is a party where life and hope and food are available.

And finally, I think that it means to never forget to include in our prayers all of those whom Jesus loves, all of those who may be invisible to the world, all of those for whom the world never seems to throw a party – and to listen well for God's response to those prayers about how we, out of our profound thankfulness for what God has done for us, can indeed work for a community, a world where everyone, everyone is part of the party, lying down there at the feast, knowing that God is good, God is good.

May it be so! Amen.