

How Have You Learned to Dance? And Why Have You Had To?
Sunday, August 1, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
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How have you learned to dance?

And why have you had to?

I TA'd for a Biblical studies professor in college. And every semester, he'd open his first lecture by saying:

"Murder, betrayal, intrigue, sex, violence ... Dynasty's got nothing on the Bible."

Now, this was back in the 1980s, so if you don't remember Dynasty with Joan Collins and John Forsythe, well ... just think Succession or Empire. Either way, the message he was trying to get across was clear:

The Bible is not dull.

In fact, if you like soap operas, if you like drama ... you're gonna love the Bible.

That's because the Bible is our story. It's the story of humanity. And our lives, when we really let people see them, are a hot mess. One thing about us humans ... we bring the drama.

What makes the Bible holy is not that God somehow dictated it word for word. The Bible is holy because it is the story of holy people, people like us, people like everyone.

People who are holy for no other reason than they are human ... and they are living incredibly human lives and trying to make sense of where the Holy is in the midst of it.

Trying to make sense of why we are here ... and why we do the things we do.

Can there be justice in an unjust world?

And most of all, can there be love ... for you, for us, for me?

The Bible is like a really good drama because in each there are heroes and villains ... and ... in a really good drama, it's not that simple. In a really good drama, the heroes have flaws and the villains have backstories.

In a really good drama, everyone is messy and complex ... and there is always more to what is happening than initially meets the eye.

So, let's look again at the drama we heard this morning.

First of all, let's get the basics of the story. There are four main characters.

Herod ... that's the king.

Herodias ... that's Herod's wife.

Herodias' daughter ... now she is unnamed in this Gospel but historians tell us her name was Salome.

And finally, John the Baptist ... you all know him. Crazy prophet, shouting and eating locusts in the desert.

Now, here's where the soap opera begins.

Herodias wasn't always Herod's wife but used to be married to Herod's brother ... and when Herod married her, John the Baptist called Herod out for marrying his brother's wife. So right there, you have a problem. This crazy man out in the desert is embarrassing both Herod and Herodias – and people are listening to him.

Now Herodias wanted to just get rid of John ... but Herod wouldn't do it. Partly because he believed John was a righteous person and didn't want the blood guilt, but also because he found John and his wisdom helpful.

What's a king to do?

But one day, Herod is having a birthday party. And the story says Salome "came in and danced, pleasing Herod and his dinner guests."

Now, again, we have to stop right here, because there's a lot that isn't said but that is definitely inferred.

Salome wasn't demonstrating the waltz.

The interpretation of this story has consistently been that her dancing was sexual and was meant to arouse Herod and his guests ... and it worked, because Herod lost his mind. Herod said to Salome "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.... even half of my kingdom."

Now this is like having a genie come out of a bottle, so Salome knows she needs to choose wisely, so she huddles with her mom ... and Herodias sees an opportunity to get rid of that thorn in her side, John the Baptist. So, Herodias tells Salome to ask Herod to bring her the head of John the Baptist. And because so many people saw Herod promise Salome everything, he has no choice but to comply. And that's how John the Baptist was executed.

Those are the basics of the story.

But that's not the whole story. The story is not just in the telling .. but in the hearing.

So, let's look at how those three characters – Herodias, Salome and Herod -- are thought of by those who hear this story.

Herodias is usually seen as conniving and wicked. In medieval Europe there was even a widespread belief that she was the supernatural leader of a cult of witches. Think Cruella DeVille or Jadis the Ice Queen in Narnia or Serena Joy in the Handmaid's Tale. That's how we see Herodias.

Now, Salome was not the Salome who went to Jesus' tomb on resurrection morning. That Salome is known as "Salome the righteous" ... mostly to distinguish her from *this* Salome, who was known as both "Salome the unrighteous" and "Salome the temptress." Think Mae West or Samantha in Sex in the City or even Mrs. Robinson in The Graduate. That's how we see Salome.

Then there's Herod. Herod gets off comparatively easy. Herod is not remembered as evil or conniving or immoral. For this instance, Herod primarily is remembered as ... weak. As just one more man who thought with his genitals and had to pay the price. Poor, weak, dumb Herod.

Think of ... well, the list is probably too long to mention there, but you could certainly start with Bill Clinton and go from there.

And while there might be some condemnation, history has taught us that for the Herods of the word, it rarely sticks ... and in fact is usually tempered by a strong dose of "what do you expect?" after all, "boys will be boys."

So that's how we see these characters. Which, frankly, says a lot more about us and the lenses we have been taught to use than it does about them.

So, now let's dig even deeper, especially into the two women. Does history treat them justly? Or is there more here than meets the eye?

First, Herodias. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great – different Herod. When she was 8, Herod the Great had her father ... Herod the Great's son ... executed and then engaged Herodias to her half-uncle, who was 20 at the time. Needless to say, Herodias didn't have a say in this. She was an 8 year old girl given in marriage to an adult. The one person who objected to this .. another son of Herod the Great ... well, Herod the Great executed him, too.

So, let's pause for a moment and think what it's like to be Herodias. She's eight years old. She should be home playing with whatever the Roman Empire era version of an Easy-Bake oven is. But instead, her grandfather executes her father and forces her to marry her uncle. If one thing

is clear to her it is that she has no power ... and she's smart, so she quickly learns that any power she hopes to have, she will have to claim for herself.

And so that's what she does. The historian Josephus says,

"Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod Antipas. (the Herod of this Gospel story)."

That was the marriage that John the Baptist objected to. And we can see now why Herodias wanted to have John the Baptist out of the way. It wasn't as simple as Herod marrying his brother's wife. For Herodias, leaving Philip and marrying Herod was not only a way out a forced and abusive marriage, it was a way to get power in a world that afforded women absolutely none.

John the Baptist was a man. He'd always had power over his life. Easy for him to condemn that marriage. Easy for him to condemn her.

There was no way Herodias was going back to the way things were. There was no way she was going to give up the power she had endured much and fought so hard for. And if John the Baptist stood in the way ... well, that's his mistake.

Now let's look at Salome.

When this story is told in film ... or even, I imagine as it plays out in your mind's eye as we tell it here ... Salome is a grown woman, or at least a young woman. In truth, Salome, Herodias' daughter from her marriage to Phillip ... was probably 13 or 14 years old.

What we understand now is that while her body was already developing sexually, her emotional identity was still lagging far behind

And ... like her mother, she lived in a world that gave girls exactly zero power ... unless they found a way to carve it out and claim it for themselves.

We don't know how Salome discovered that she could use her sexuality to get power ... but she did. And maybe she enjoyed it. Nothing wrong with enjoying your sexuality ... even though she also lived in a world that saw her sexuality as not for her but for the gaze and use of men. So, maybe she would have made that choice anyway. But the point is if she wanted to have power, she had basically no alternative. The role society had for her was to be used for the sexual pleasure of men ... so she took that role and used it.

She learned to dance.

Herodias and Salome were women living in a world that gave women no power .. and that in fact frequently used power against them in abusive and traumatic ways. They had little to no control not only of their future but of their own bodies.

Herodias and Salome may have been gifted and brilliant in any number of ways ... they probably were. But none of that was valued. They learned from earliest childhood that the only value they had was the value their sexuality had to men .. and they were smart enough to recognize that if their sexuality could be used by men who held power over them, they could use it to get power over those men.

Herodias and Salome were brilliant and courageous. And yet we do to them what we do not only to women but to every image of God to whom we continue today to deny power and agency. If they have the temerity to try to carve out and claim power and agency for themselves, using the only means available to them, we condemn them for their efforts.

They are literally damned if they do, and damned if they don't.

So it was. And so, it still is.

I began this sermon with two questions:

How have you learned to dance?
And why have you had to?

These are questions I never have to ask myself, because the world is structured to preserve and increase *my* power and agency. And yet, these are incredibly important questions, because they are at the heart of what makes Jesus revolutionary. Asking these questions is literally the beginning of revolution.

What is revolutionary about Jesus is that Jesus sets a table and invites everyone to gather as beloved, honored guests. With full power and full agency. With the ability to give of themselves fully ... or hold back whatever they choose. With love offered to them with no preconditions whatsoever. With no barriers to anyone displaying and cultivating their brilliance.

What is revolutionary about Jesus is that he envisions a world where nobody ever has to learn to dance to survive.

That's why we are here. That's why we dare to gather and proclaim that we walk with this revolutionary Jesus. That's why we claim our values of radical inclusion, courageous justice, joyful spirituality and ethical stewardship.

But that world doesn't exist yet.
That church doesn't exist yet.
That's why we have to ask the questions:

How have you learned to dance?
And why have you had to?

Have you had to learn to adjust your behavior, your appearance, your speech and expression so that others with power will be more comfortable?

Have you had to do it because that's the only way you will get treated fairly, or get decent service, or have a chance at the job ... or just avoid the hassle?

How have you learned to dance?

Have you learned to play small, to code switch, to act white, to pass as straight?

Have you learned to censor your thoughts and ideas, to use your sexuality not for your own pleasure and joy but as a survival skill to get power that isn't available to you any other way, to downplay aspects of your personality and spirituality so that others won't be made uncomfortable by you?

Have you learned to bite your tongue and suffer in silence?

To put others' expectations of you first and your own health second?

Have you learned to live with the continual Sophie's choice of your soul or your survival?

How have you learned to dance?
And why have you had to?

If we are going to walk with the revolutionary Jesus. If we are going to become God's beloved community, we have to get beyond the appearances and the judgments. We have to get beyond the preconceptions and paradigms that have been shaped by the dominant white, male, cisheteronormative culture that, frankly, hasn't changed much at all from when this Gospel story was written.

We have to stop condemning Herodias and Salome and saying "boys will be boys" to Herod.

How have you learned to dance?
And why have you had to?

Yes ... out in the world.
And ... yes ... right here at All Saints Church.

Because all this doesn't just happen out there ... it happens in here. Not because we are bad or shameful or evil, but because we are human ... and we have all been shaped by powerful forces

that lie to us and deny beautiful images of God the power and agency that is rightfully theirs since before our scripture was written.

How have you learned to dance?
And why have you had to?

We have to create space for stories to be told ... and deeply listened to ... stories that will be hard to hear but which are the beginning of transformation ... that are the beginning of revolution ... that are the beginning of liberation not just for some but for all.

In the coming months and years, we are going to continue this work. We are creating spaces to share our stories. To talk openly and honestly about how we have learned to dance ... and why we have had to. We will listen deeply to each other in love ... and we will try together to let shame be our teacher and not our judge, recognizing that what we all share is our infinite belovedness in God's sight and our equal claim to a place at Christ's table.

Herodias, Salome ... we know you are out there. You're right here in this room.

May All Saints Church be the place where you can claim the power that has always been yours.

May All Saints Church be the place where your stories are told and believed and where your wounds are healed.

May All Saints Church be the place where you dance not because you have to ... but because you want to. Amen.