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The Birthday Party from Hell

By the Rev. Salying Wong

The ruthless, the unprincipled, and the self-aggrandizing men of power have gathered for a bacchanal birthday feast for King Herod Antipas. [Hum “Happy Birthday” song.] Today, we have performance theater, in which Herod will display the extent of his depravity. The guests arrive already drunk, immediately playing their roles of both braggart and sycophant. The prostitutes will show up later. This party is no decent place for a woman. Even Queen Herodias is sequestered in another room—she, whom John the Baptist criticized for her indecent marriage to Herod Antipas. She had divorced Phillip, his half-brother, and married Herod, violating the laws of Leviticus. Who cares about the Torah when you’ve got power to grab. Yes, she chose to marry the more powerful man! And why should she deprive herself? That damn John the Baptist kept going on and on publicly about their violation of the Torah. She had her husband arrest John. But it irks her to no end that Herod refuses to kill John. He says he likes listening to John. What an imbecile! Even she could see that whatever spiritual interest Herod has is easily squelched by his willingness to do whatever it takes to acquire power and wealth. That’s why she married him. King Herod Antipas is the Jewish tetrarch handpicked by the Romans to rule Galilee. As long as he protects Roman interests, his power is absolute. So, Herodias bides her time in the next room, listening to the men make merry.

But, who is this at the birthday party? Herodias’ daughter is dancing for these men when even her mother is too honorable to be at such a party! Why is she here? Is she a spy, sent from her mother? Is she compelled by her new stepfather to entertain these men? Does she have her own goals; is she playing for keeps, hobnobbing with men of power?

So, she dances for the men and they clap and cheer and drool. Three sheets to the wind, Herod rises to the full stature of his arrogance and

recklessness and boasts in front of his men, "I'll give you anything, daughter, even up to half my kingdom." The men are all impressed and they pat the birthday boy on the back. "You're a big man, Herod Antipas!"

Now is her moment! This young woman runs to the other room, where Queen Herodias is waiting. "Mother," she says, "What shall I ask for?" The queen doesn't hesitate. She tightens her hands into fists and snarls, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist!"

So her daughter runs back to the party and says to Herod Antipas in front of all his guests, "Give me the head of John the Baptist." And with a sneer, she adds dark humor to her mother's cruelty, "And put it on a platter!"

Suddenly, Herod Antipas is sober. Has he been duped? He does enjoy bandying words with John, but, come on, he was never really going to repent. Now, as he stands in front of his men, he digs even deeper into his recklessness and power. What does he care about another prophet? His death is certainly less than half his kingdom. So be it. He orders John's execution, and adds, "Make sure that platter is polished!" And all the men laugh; Herodias' daughter laughs and Queen Herodias' laughs. There's no pleasure like the cocktail of malice and power. When the queen takes the platter with John's head on it, her eyes light with victory and hate. She whispers to John's head, "Speak now, prophet!"

This story of John the Baptist tells us that if we think Jesus' messianic work is only against the demons and the sickness they cause, we need to think again. In fact, the demons obey Jesus and he is able to easily vanquish their power. Even the apostles are given power to do this and apparently can do it quite easily. But, the power of humans to destroy, to hurt and oppress—it is even worse than what the demons are capable of doing. Destructive human power is not easily vanquished. Today, it kills the dissenter John the Baptist. It will kill Jesus as he continues John's work, announcing that the current order of human power is not the Kingdom of God. God wants the death-dealing human powers to come down, to be replaced with a power that cares for the lowest. In order to address the

destructive human power, Jesus walks the way of the cross. He inverts the violence of the cross with the non-violence of his sacrifice, exposing the grotesqueness of destructive human power. He invites anyone who would learn the way of inversion of destructive human power, saying, "Follow me."

The world is in desperate need of Christian work to resist destructive human power. It is heavy work and most people will not choose it. It is easy to be eaten up by it. For those who do, Jesus teaches them what is necessary to follow him. Pray. When it gets really heavy, go away to a lonely place and pray. The work of resisting this kind of power will take everything from you, including your soul, if you do not rest and pray. So, that is what he teaches us today, rest and pray and go back to work. It is enough.