

I am so very grateful to be with all of you today. The opportunity to serve Saint Dunstan's as a curate is an incredible gift and blessing. This is my first Sunday sermon, so I admit to feeling a bit nervous. We are still getting to know each other, and these texts today, they are big texts.

We are in Texas though, so I guess it is either go big or go home, so I am going to start with a big statement: our character is formed and manifested by our connection to God. Not our reputation, but rather our character. The part of who we are, flows from our relationship with God like a beautiful dancer flows through a ballet performance.

As we are still in the getting to know each other phase, I am going to start with a story on this note. A few years ago, I was a youth minister at Good Shepherd in Kingwood and mom of a baby girl. I was still finding my footing as a mother. My daughter, Grace, was incredibly bright from the beginning, which meant I had to constantly find ways to occupy her mind. In my enthusiasm, I kept saying "yes" to all sorts of activities: trading babysitting times with friends, parent groups, ministry activities, volunteer opportunities, and so on. But none of this was deepening my relationship with God; most of it was only making me more tired. Then, a dear friend of mine reminded me about the difference between character and reputation. He told me, it is not about who *likes me* or how much I do, but rather about how my connection to God shows up in my life. This helped me focus more on my character rather than all the worldly pressure

In our gospel for today there are many people concerned with their reputation: Herod, Herodias, their daughter, and likely the party goers.

Then there is John the Baptist; he had character. This prophet knew his destiny from the moment of his conception.¹ John's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, prepared him to go out into the wilderness and eat locust and honey. He prayed with people and baptized, most famously Jesus. John told people to repent. He urged everyone to come to a new life through Christ. John wore camel skin, like the biblical prophet Elijah.² Clearly, this was a man on a mission, perhaps extreme by our standards. Yet John had a solid foundation that came from God.

Even though John was popular, he remained humble. He once told his disciples that he is not fit to tie the throng of Jesus' sandals.³ He knew his mission was larger than his reputation. John speaks the truth, telling Herod and Herodias that they are sinning.⁴ That takes guts to speak out against such a powerful political leader. John was willing to risk his reputation to speak the truth.

Now, let's contrast John with the other characters in this gospel narrative. There is Herod, Herodias, their Daughter, her mom, and the party goers. The pride of Herod is on display for all

¹ This is a subtle reference to the passages where John's parents express their feelings about John's birth and Jesus Luke 1:39-45; 68-79.

² The exact scripture reference is 2 Kings 1:8, where Elijah was referred to as a "hairy man." Looking at the term, it is unsure if Elijah had a long beard or dressed in camel skin. This is nicely looked at in the Cambridge Bible. You can find a reference online: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_kings/1-8.htm

³ Luke 1:36

⁴ For more information on this, see Dr. C. Clifton Black's Commentary on Mark 6:14-29:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-mark-614-29-3>

of us, meant to give us pause⁵ in our own lives. I'm not sure what Herod has to be proud of, perhaps his wife? Herodias must have been truly beautiful to steal Herod's heart; particularly with him breaking religious laws to sin and marry her.

Looking at the larger context of this scripture, we must understand that Herod and his family lived in a small community, the marketplace was the Instagram and Facebook, even a bit of twitter;⁶ their secrets, all their lives were fully on display. Everyone would have been talking about Herod.

Our main scene, in the banquet, is a flashback. In the Gospel of Mark we already know John had been killed. When John's death is being discussed it is because Herod is afraid that John's ghost has come back to haunt him. He is worried about what people are *saying*. Herod cares about his reputation. Herod seeks the praises and approval of others. His foundation is not with God, but rather with managing his reputation.⁷

It is also important to note that as our scripture passage begins, we are in the midst of a journey. We, the hearers of the Gospel, are no longer on the Jordan river, but rather firmly back in Galilee. We are not supposed to be on ups and downs of the sea, yet this is exactly where Mark takes us in our story today. Before Jesus' messages were shared and he healed the woman who had been outcast for 12 years.⁸

This deadly flashback has all the trappings of a difficult situation. We know the ending, yet even if we did not, the scenario is enough to make one's stomach turn: there is a good man in prison, a sinful couple with a dubious relationship, and fear that John will continue to speak out. So, what is the logical easing of tension in this situation?

It is throwing a party! Now we have a crowd. And we learn that Herod, like Pilate after him, was a people pleaser.

What does the people pleaser do, does he keep his daughter hidden away, ensuring that she stays innocent? Does this young girl stand up for herself and tell her father and mother she wants a different life, perhaps heeding the words of that imprisoned prophet?

Sadly, this story is not a Disney movie, the young girl in question dances for the crowd. Now, we do not know the nature of this dance and scholars disagree about whether it was G rated or closer to R;⁹ I am inclined to think it was a more innocent dance, because the greek word here for Girl is the same one used a few passages before for Jarius' daughter.¹⁰ The Gospel, in the original context, was read as a long story and this word play would have given a hint to the listener. The same way we catch a running joke in a movie.

⁵ Mark for Everyone (The New Testament for Everyone) by N. T. Wright. <https://a.co/6VmQJ00> p.76

⁶ Wright, N.T. (2004). Mark for Everyone. p.71

⁷ N.T. Wright discusses this in Mark for Everyone (The New Testament for Everyone); Dr. Emerson B. Powery also touches on this subject in his commentary on Mark 6:14-29

⁸ The idea of the context of the sermon comes from The Reverend George Hermanson's sermon: <https://www.holytextures.com/2009/06/mark-6-14-29-year-b-pentecost-july-10-july-16-sermon.html>

⁹ Wright, N.T. (2004). Mark for Everyone. p.74

¹⁰ I am not a great linguist, however, with the works of F. Blass and A. Debrunner. Robert W. Funk. University of Chicago 1961. A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, I have been able to see how the words are fitting into place in this context of the sermon.

This girl was innocent and in need of guidance.

Humans need molding. An infant does not come out knowing how to walk. A teenager does not know how to drive on 1960, 45N, or beltway 8 automatically when they turn 15. Actually, from my experience, coming from Atascocita over the past couple of weeks, many of us adults can't do that well either!

We need God's guidance to shape our character. That is why He has given us prophets, scriptures, and our faith communities.

So Herodias' daughter needed some help knowing that even a playful dance such as the one in which she was taking part needs to be kept for her family.¹¹ That was the tradition of the time and that is what would have been best for all involved.

Nevertheless, like so many strong teenagers, this young woman comes into the room, she glides into the room.¹² She has some confidence as she enters this unusual situation. Her dance pleases her father immensely, so much so that he makes an offer reminiscent of King Xerxes to Esther.¹³ This is also a bit inappropriate. It is extravagant. To my modern ears, it is a bit creepy.

So looking at our readings today one might wonder if there is no Good News in our lesson.¹⁴ For me, it is good news: all we need to do is love God and each other enough to build our character. We only need to ignore the trappings of the world. We can rise to the occasion.

As Christians, we are supposed to do the right thing even in the midst of crazy situations. That is why we need a solid foundation to build upon. We need to develop good character. Herod was many things, but he was not a man of character.

Considering Herod, and how he interacts with his daughter and wife, it seems almost transactional. When I see parents with their children, I notice how they give without expectation of return. Herod's daughter gave him a gift; the gift of her art in the form of a dance. Instead of simply praising her, he asks her what reward she wants.

We know he has been listening and been intrigued by John the Baptist's words, perhaps he feels some shame because he gave into his lust for his brother's wife who is now his wife. Notice that Herod does not stand up for his wife against John using strong rhetoric. He does so in an impulsive manner, he waits to have John executed. Perhaps he is embarrassed because of all the gossip still happening around this issue.

¹¹ Again, Reverend Herman's ideas in his sermons were helpful in thinking about the cultural context of the days. Just as there are different cultural rules between Texas and the Yankee states where I come from, there are differences between our culture and the Ancient Near Eastern World. <https://www.holytextures.com/2009/06/mark-6-14-29-year-b-pentecost-july-10-july-16-sermon.html>

¹² This is another Greek Translation issue. The scholars translating the text for the New Revised Standard Version that we use in church does not choose this word, yet Blass and A. Debrunner. Robert W. Funk. University of Chicago 1961. A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, 423(4) indicate that it would be appropriate here.

¹³ Esther 5:3

¹⁴ This is another reference from Reverend Hermanson's sermon <https://www.holytextures.com/2009/06/mark-6-14-29-year-b-pentecost-july-10-july-16-sermon.html>; I found Reverend Hermanson through the Right Reverend Andrew C. Doyle's blog. Bishop Doyle's writing very much informed my research. <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/search?q=Proper+10B>

This adds to the very suspect promise he makes to his daughter to give her anything she desires. When she asks for John's head, Herod's response reflects a man concerned with what people will think about him. It is not surprising that such a man raised a daughter who adds to Herodias' cruel revenge hungry idea. Their daughter requests not just the head, but the Head of John the Baptist on a platter. And so the story of John the Baptist is told. My brothers and sisters in Christ, our decisions today are equally steeped in our character.

How about you? Are you pleased with the direction of your spiritual life? Are you building up your character? Or are you a people pleaser? Are you afraid of saying no to the crowds, out of fear that your reputation might diminish in their eyes? Or maybe your heart has a mixture of both John and Herod battling it out in the tension between character and reputation.

Following up on Fr. Roman's sermon from last week, I wonder if we could begin to include focus on more Godly tasks and see our hearts and lives transformed. Can each of us find activities that nurture our character rather than seeking to improve our reputation?

Back to my story before, when I was a new mother, I was seeking ways to build my character. I joined the Daughters of the King at my husband's church in Atascocita. I learned to steep myself in evangelism through prayer and scripture. This commitment has blessed me with living out of a more balanced life. Now I don't feel as much pressure to say "yes" to everything that comes along, screaming for my attention.

At our Baptism we promise to "seek and serve Christ better in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self."¹⁵ This is a hard task, only possible with God's help. Living with character means there will be times when it might feel as though our head will end up on a platter. Yet the pursuit of character is worth it. The rewards might just be heaven on earth. Amen.

¹⁵ This phrase is directly from The Book of Common Prayer 1979. It is a part of the Baptismal Covenant (p. 305).