

Served on a Platter

July 12, 2009

(Pentecost 6 - Year B)

Mark 6: 14-29

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

A common practice has emerged when going out to eat at a restaurant. At restaurants such as TGI Friday's or Bennigan's, you sit down and take a look at the menu, a menu that is as large as a phone book. You order something to drink and maybe an appetizer of fried cheese or stuffed potato skins.

After enjoying the company of friends at such a restaurant, you begin to hear an unusual noise coming out from the kitchen.

The kitchen doors then burst open and a parade of waitresses and busboys snake through the restaurant making a huge racket - cheering and clapping.

This parade of folks then arrives at a large table of someone who is celebrating a birthday.

With the restaurant staff gathered around the birthday boy or girl, whose face is now five different shades of red, the Bennigan's staff claps their hands and sings:

1-2. 1-2-3-4.

*Happy, happy birthday,
On this your special day.
Happy, happy birthday,
From Bennigan's to you.*

Then the entire restaurant claps half-heartedly.

And a piece of double fudge chocolate cake is presented ala mode, with enough spoons to share around the table.

However, this whole birthday spectacle at these restaurants is really very superficial.

The waitresses and the busboys could really care less if it is your birthday.

And the entire restaurant could really care less as well.

Because this birthday party, this birthday feast, is a vision of a kingdom that is ruled by consumerism and fake relationships.

In the Gospel of Mark, we hear the story of *another* birthday party, the birthday dinner of King Herod.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark goes into great detail to describe this birthday party, including the erotic dance that King Herod receives as a birthday gift.

You see, at Herod's birthday party, the kitchen doors swing wide open for a special surprise.

And the birthday present is not clean cut waiters dressed in khaki pants and clapping their hands.

Instead, Herod's birthday present is a lap dance from a beautiful girl.

This erotic dance is so wrong on many levels.

Because of infidelity and incest within King Herod's complicated family tree, the dancer is also King Herod's step-daughter, his niece and his grand-niece, all rolled into one.

King Herod is so aroused by this birthday dance that he offers to give the girl whatever she wants.

And because the prophet John the Baptist has been preaching against the infidelity and incest within Herod's family, Herod's wife encourages the dancing girl to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter.

Herod keeps his promise and John the Baptist is killed.

This birthday party, this birthday feast, is a vision of a kingdom that is ruled by sex and power.

Now the disturbing story of Herod's birthday party is about a kingdom that we are all too familiar with,

A kingdom where power and sex and fame and fear rule all of our actions.

Some people wonder why the story of Herod's birthday party is even included at all in scripture,

Because it is difficult to discern the good news in such a salacious story.

However, the good news, I believe, comes in the last verse of this story, as it is told in Mark's Gospel.

In that verse, Mark writes:

“When [John the Baptist's] disciples heard about [his death], they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

In the midst of birthday parties filled with double fudge cake and happy-clappy songs,
In the midst of birthday parties filled with strip tease dances and a head on a platter,
The people of the kingdom of God care for each other by taking the body of John the Baptist and carefully laying it in a tomb.

For the kingdom of God is *not* like a birthday party at TGI Friday's, fueled by consumerism.

The kingdom of God is *not* like a birthday party at a strip club, fueled by power.

The kingdom of God is like a feast, an overflowing buffet where death row inmates are treated with respect, where women are valued as equals to men, where the poor are given a proper burial, and where all are fed and welcomed.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the writer of the Gospel of Mark places the story of Herod's birthday feast right before the story of Jesus' feeding of 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish.

Mark wants to contrast the kingdom of Herod with the kingdom of God. Mark wants to contrast the feasting in Herod's palace with the feasting of God, where *everyone* is fed.

When we lived in the Washington, DC area, our friends, the Shepherd family, came up from Florida to visit us for Thanksgiving.

The Shepherds offered to take us out for a nice dinner one evening, just the adults, their treat.

They picked a restaurant in Georgetown that was one of the finest restaurants I have ever eaten in.

We were treated to many courses for dinner:

An appetizer, a soup course, then came a palate cleanser, then the salad, then the main course.

A special wine accompanied each course.

And all of this was followed up with a tray of delicious desserts.

The conversation and the food were wonderful.

But as heavenly as the meal seemed at the time, this dinner with friends was *not* a vision of the kingdom of God.

Because after we had stuffed ourselves,

After we had partied like King Herod and his friends,
After we had retrieved our coats from the coat check clerk,
We stepped out into the cold East Coast air to retrieve our car from the
valet.

And as we stepped out of the restaurant, I saw a man standing at the
curb, obviously homeless, with a shabby jacket that would not
keep him warm through the night.

And as I looked into the eyes of that man, I felt just as guilty as if I had
attended King Herod's birthday dinner, complete with strippers
and the head of an innocent man on a platter.

For the kingdom of God, the real feast of God, is a foreign country to us.
The kingdom of God is *not* where power and consumerism and money
and superficial relationships reign.

The kingdom of God is where the faithful few take the body of John the
Baptist and bury him quietly and reverently.

The kingdom of God is where the faithful few take the money that they
would have spent on a lavish dinner -

And use that money to feed at least 25 - or more - of the poor that God
loves so much.

So, the next time you have a birthday, don't go to Bennigan's to hear a
corny song.

The next time you have a birthday, don't throw a party with dancing
girls and fine wines and macho displays of power.

The next time you have a birthday, go out into the streets - and invite
everyone.

Invite the poor, the lonely, the people who don't speak English.

Invite the people who are burying their friends who have been beheaded
by the powerful.

Serve dinner to *all* of God's people,
On a platter.

AMEN.