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Woodhaven Presbyterian Church  
Irving, Texas  
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Mark 6:14-29, 32-44

### As Different as Night and Day

The feasts could not be any different, could they? I'm talking about the two feasts found in our lessons from Mark today. Two feasts—put together—side by side, purposefully placed by the Gospel writer of Mark. Two feasts, full of people, full of food, and full of contradictions between the two. One feast, thrown by Herod in his extravagant palace to celebrate his birthday. The other feast, thrown by Jesus on the seashore for necessity's sake and to illustrate God's abundance. Two feasts, side by side, as different as night and day.

You could tell the difference immediately just by the invitations. The one from the palace was done in beautiful, fine calligraphy on elegant thick paper. It had a matching envelope in the same color scheme with a lovely small RSVP card and a self-addressed envelope to make everything easier. The invitation from Jesus, though, was really no invitation at all, at least not in any kind of concrete sense. Rather, his invitation was dispersed by word of mouth, buzzing throughout the crowd as the day began to shift into twilight and the stomachs began to grumble.

The disciples just wanted to send everyone away to fend for themselves. They started asking questions that would have fit better at the palace rather than at the seashore, "Are we supposed to spend our money for their food?" Jesus, however, refused to let them get away with their selfishness. "Why don't you give them something to eat," he pressed.

And as the disciples tried to figure out how they would do it, the word got out that dinner was being prepared and the people started to sit down in groups on the green grass. Looking around, you could conclude it was definitely a "come as you are" kind of feast. You had people who felt comfortable walking into Neiman Marcus and people who were most at home at the Bridge. You had people who could barely contain their tears and those whose faces lit up with joy. You had babies who found their nourishment and comfort at their mother's breast and older folks who had been without their mothers a very long time. Rich and poor, strong and needy, young and old—all of them spread the word and sat down. Expectancy filled the sea air.

Expectancy filled the air at the palace, too. Everyone who was anyone was invited to Herod's feast. You saw the top court nobility, the officers of the imperial army, all of the leading Galilean businessmen (without their wives, I might add). They all arrived at the palace and pulled up to the red carpet where the paparazzi gathered like vultures. Everyone was excited. The wait-staff at the palace had been working day and night to get ready. Vats of wine were scattered everywhere. The finest silver and china were gingerly placed on the tables, even though the servants all knew that by the time this party ended, very few things would still be in one piece. It was the nature of the beast. Self-indulgence would be the order of the day. It always was at the palace. And as the powerful began to stream in and the noise level started to rise, Herod grinned in anticipation of a party like no other.

The noise level on the seashore was fairly low for such a crowd of people. It was as if everyone knew that patience was called for and necessary. Most of the people did not know exactly what was going on with their meal, but their faces shone with anticipation. They just knew that Jesus would provide. And sure enough, just as the disciples' anxiety reached a feverish pitch, Jesus stepped in. "How many loaves have you? Go and see." So the disciples walked around to see if anyone had anything to share.

The need for generosity buzzed around the groups as quickly as the verbal invitation had spread. Older women dug in their purses to see what they could find. Men who had brought their lunch buckets from the day before opened them to see if they had anything left. The disciples collected everything and discovered it was a rather paltry offering. "We have five loaves and two fish." The crowd, despite their best efforts, started to get a bit nervous. The adults began to tell their children, "You will have my share." On the seashore, they assumed that generous self-sacrifice would be the order of the day. But, strangely enough, no one seemed to mind. They simply were glad to be together, all in one place, sitting in the vicinity of their shepherd. The knowledge of whose company they were keeping seemed to dull their hunger pains.

No one who gathered at the palace had a clue about hunger pains. The party was in full swing. And after everyone was stuffed with good foods and rich wines, of networking and gossip, their real fun began. They knew whose company they were keeping and their salacious appetite was not dulled one bit. Herod knew he needed to deliver. So in his state of drunken power, he sent for his stepdaughter, who was also his niece. The whole back story to that familial relationship had been a tabloid-worthy drama. Herod had his brother's wife divorce his brother to marry him. It was a risky move, not just because it got all the tongues wagging, but also because it was against Jewish law and Herod was Jewish, at least in theory. He would probably say that he was spiritual but not religious. Regardless, John the Baptist had responded to Herod's actions and told him the truth about his immoral behavior. And John's decision to speak truth to power had landed him in jail.

On the evening of his birthday party, Herod just preferred to ignore inconvenient things like truth. He preferred to ignore lots of things, like decency and morality. So his stepdaughter, a girl who was probably no more than a young teenager, came as ordered and danced for all of those drunken men. And Herod, who was the most power-drunk of all, was so moved by the dance that he decided to show off for his guests. After all, you are what you do. He loudly announced to the young girl that he would give her anything she wanted. "Even half of my kingdom," he announced to the pleasure of the crowd. The men around the tables cheered with excitement. This was proving to be an even better feast than usual.

The crowds on the seashore were cheering with excitement too. It was certainly a better feast than any of them had shared in a long time. They had no idea how it had happened, but Jesus and his disciples had managed to give all of them enough food and drink to satisfy. They had watched as he had held up the loaves and the fish and blessed them, thanking God for such gifts. Thanking God for God's provision and abundance. And they had watched as he had broken the bread and given it to them. And they had watched as basket after basket of food was passed around from group to group. It never ran out. There was more than enough for all. It was proving to be one of the most spectacular feasts of their lives.

Herod's stepdaughter ran out of the room to find her mother. Her mother was still steamed at John for his comeuppance. She did not like being told what to do. She also did not like the fact that Herod had not dealt with John appropriately. Just like usual, she would have to clean up her husband's mess. She told her young daughter exactly what to say and the girl took off with her request. "I want John's head, on a platter," she informed the king. The men around the tables showed their support for her demand. This was the most spectacular feast of their lives. An excess of wine, an excess of food, an excess of seduction, an excess of power, all mixed together with a excessive dose of violence. It was the kind of feast the empire throws the best. Herod, though he felt a tinge of regret over his stepdaughter's demand, agreed. He had to agree, he decided. John's life was certainly not worth ruining his reputation over. But by the time the head actually arrived on the platter, all of the party guests were too sated with the sustenance of death to even notice or care. And they all stumbled out into the night, while Herod sat awake, trying to ignore the slight trembling in his hands.

The crowds on the seashore began to disperse. Jesus had told them farewell and gotten into the boat again. And as they started their journeys home, they felt pleasantly satisfied with the sustenance of life. And for many of them, because of that feast on that night, they felt like their lives were really just beginning. Some of them trembled with joy.

These two feasts could not be more different from one another. And yet Mark purposefully placed them side-by-side, one right after the other, set up for contrast and comparison. One feast was designated for just a few—those for whom power was an entitlement and not a responsibility. Those for whom self-indulgence was the order of the day, every day. Those for whom someone else's life was certainly not worth sacrificing their own reputations or desires. Heads have to roll from time to time, you know. It is not personal. It is just business.

The other feast was designated for all those who simply knew they needed a shepherd. Rich and poor, strong and needy, young and old—if they had any power they knew to whom it truly belonged. They knew at whose table they sat day in and day out. It was a feast thrown for those for whom generosity was the order of the day, every day. Those for whom someone else's life was worth just as much as their own because when you got right down to it, they were all family. And it was always personal for those at the seashore, even when it was business.

Two feasts—one in a palace and one on the seashore. One thrown by a king whose hands trembled because of the violence they unleashed and the evil that would not let him go. One thrown by the King whose hands blessed and broke and gave because of the life and love he incarnated and the goodness that would not let him go. Two feasts—one full of self-indulgence, the other full of generosity. Two feasts—one that stuffed but did not satisfy, one that filled and nourished.

Mark puts both of these feasts side by side, back to back, to help us compare and contrast. And I can't help but wonder, if he does this so we might ask ourselves at whose feast do we spend most of our time and therefore, do we tremble with fear or with joy?