

Sermon Text: Mark 6:17-29

Now, no one likes to be put down in public. On vacation in Myrtle Beach, a husband and wife were walking through one of the arcades on Ocean Drive. The husband found these old antique amusement scales, and he dropped a coin into it, and not only did it tell his weight, but it also printed out a little character card. You've probably seen things like that. He stepped up on it, he put a coin in, and it popped out a ticket, and the ticket said, "You have a keen mind and magnetic personality. You are admired by all." He smiled and shook his head, and handed it to his wife. She looked at it, and said, "It got your weight wrong, too."

No one likes to be put down in public especially the powerful, the prideful, and the prestigious. That describes everyone at Herod's birthday party, especially Herod himself. Now this was Herod the Great's son. The Great was the one who killed all the male babies in Bethlehem trying to get rid of Jesus at His birth. This Herod Antipus or Herod, Junior, and he had killed all the fatted calves and invited all the fat cats to his birthday. It was not so much a party as it was a presentation of his ostentatious wealth and power. It was a command performance for anyone who was anyone. A great place to do some serious networking, to mingle, to posture, to flatter, to lobby. The wine was flowing. The music was playing. Deals were done, and egos were swelling. You know, Herod was not really a king. That wasn't his title. He was only a governor, but we know something of his character in that he called himself a king. Even outside of the Bible, the Jewish historian, Josephus, says that he called himself a king and that got him in trouble. Also, Josephus records that he had some trouble with John the Baptist so that confirms what Mark writes here. Strictly speaking, Herod and his wife should not be married. She used to be his brother Phillip's wife, and Phillip was still very much alive, and it was a relationship that was forbidden by the Law of Moses. It was considered incestuous. Forbidden! Herod was a half Jew, and did not care about the Jewish law. Who was going to speak strictly to the governor, who called himself the king of Galilee? Certainly not anyone at this birthday party. They all winked at each other's sins, and they all wanted more power and more prestige, and they thought playing up to Herod was the way to go. His guests looked the other way, and said, more or less, you take what you want, and we'll grab what we want, and that's the way the world works.

Somewhere, way down below in the dungeon, was someone who did dare to speak. John the Baptist. John the Baptist was naïve enough to believe that right and wrong actually existed, and that wrong should be confronted, even publicly, even in a governor. But like all the prophets who confronted the powerful, it cost him. He confronted also the conspiracy of silence of those who wished to be powerful, and he was sent to the dungeon. How rude! How quaint to believe that the powerful could be held to the standards of God, but that was what John the Baptist did. See he didn't know what so many people know, the worldly version of the Golden Rule. Do you know the worldly version of the Golden Rule? He who has the gold makes the rules.

John named names, and he named sins, and he preached repent or perish even to Herod so he landed in jail because Herod was a little bit afraid of him. He knew him to be a righteous and a holy man, and he wanted him to be quiet, to be contained, to be controlled, but he was afraid to put him to death.

Back upstairs at the party, Herod had impressed all of his political cronies and his enemies in high fashion; after all, power and prestige are no good if you can't see it reflected in the envy of other people's eyes! That's what he was doing.

C. S. Lewis explains that pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich or being clever or being good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer and of being cleverer and of being better looking than others. If everyone else was equally rich and equally clever and equally good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about says Lewis. It is the comparison that makes you proud. The pleasure of being above the rest, the pleasures of knowing that the rest have less than you do and are somehow inferior to you.

Herod's party was a show of how much more he had than all the guests of the three Ps – power, prestige, and pride. At the climax of the show, Herod put his stepdaughter, who was also his niece, on display. She was apparently beautiful and talented and seductive. She was whirling and leaping and gyrating around the room. Every eye was upon her. Having drunk deeply at the party, and being caught up in the moment, this ruler, this stepfather, who was also apparently a bit of a dirty old man, gave in and said, "I promise you for this wonderful performance anything you want up to half of my kingdom!" So she went to her mom, and said, "What should I ask for?" Her mother, who was so angry with John the Baptist for daring to call her sin a sin, said, "I want John the Baptist's head on a platter!"

Herod was frightened of John, and thought him to be a righteous man, as I said before, he was irritating, but righteous, but to those of us who want to be left alone in our sins, righteous men and women are always irritating, aren't they? They remind us of what we lack. There he was, caught before the people he wanted to impress. He wrote a check with his mouth that he didn't really want to cash. He had a moment in the spotlight to decide of whom he was more afraid, God, the crowd's opinion, or his wife, and so John the Baptist lost his head. Herod weighed his options. He thought like this. I cannot admit weakness and so I will do what I know to be wrong to maintain the lie that I am all-powerful. I will do anything, anything, but admit that I'm wrong. I will not lose face. I will not sacrifice my pride, not even for the truth or for the life of a righteous man.

Now, do you think Herod was strong to refuse to admit that he was wrong to marry his brother's wife away from his brother? Was he wrong to punish John for saying so? Was he wrong to misuse his power to imprison John? Was he wrong to have a righteous man beheaded just to save face with his wife and his party people? Is it strength to never admit you're wrong? No! That is not strength. Never admitting mistakes or wrongs or sin is cowardly and spineless. It is not strength. Refusing by twisted pride to admit wrongs, mistakes, or sins is another way of saying, I am perfect. I am complete and I am whole, and I need nothing from anyone. It comes perilously close to proclaiming I worship me. I am my own God. My will be done. Besides, if you will not confess wrongs, you can never grow beyond them. If you refuse to confess sins and weakness then you can never gain strength over them. Sin, mistakes, and wrongs own you when pride digs in and takes over your life. God is far from you and so is everyone else when pride digs in and takes over your life. You

become a lie. You become a lie who must destroy the truth-tellers around you in order to make yourself true.

Herod could not afford to lose face with the movers and shakers of Galilee so Herod's pride and prestige and power actually killed John the Baptist. Now, what does that have to do with you and me? You may think, well, Jim, that's an interesting story, but what does it have to do with you and me? Well, these three Ps can hurt us, too.

Financially. We've been talking about maybe having a financial program about how we use money because so many of us are so over our heads in debt. Financially. Money is power in our culture. Do we use money in ways that we know to be wasteful and wrong just because we can? Do we look around at our credit bills and our deep debts and rage at the unpleasant truth they tell us? Husband blames wife, and wife blames husband. We do that at my house. I'm not the only one! Then we know what Herod felt like. Guilt of misused power never tastes sweet. It sours and sickens our soul. We can't really enjoy it. Often we, like Herod, buy things we don't really want or need, spend money we don't have to impress people we don't like! We can get caught up in the never-ending cycle of debt just to be in fashion this year. Why? Pride. Power. Prestige. We live like kings and queens. We spend to excess. We eat to excess. The doctors say we die like kings and queens of diseases brought on by ease and excess. We are told that we should not deny ourselves anything, just go ahead and put it on the credit card. The commercials work! Savings are at an all-time low in our nation, and debt is at an all-time high.

Along those lines, did you hear about the clever salesman? This is funny. A clever salesman who said he had closed hundreds of deals, sales deals, with this one line. If I hear any of you in sales use it, I will be ashamed. This is the line that he used. He said, "Let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn't afford." You see how that works? Pride.

The three Ps can get you killed. During the battle of the wilderness in the Civil War, Union General John Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. At one point, he came to a parapet over which he stood tall, and he gazed in the direction of the enemy. His officers suggested from down here that he ought to also be down low. He said, "Nonsense! They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance – pow! He was shot dead. Fatally wounded. Pride.

Two battleships were on maneuvers in heavy weather. Visibility was poor with patchy fog. The captain remained on the bridge to keep watch. Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light bearing on the starboard bow." The captain said, "Signal that ship, "We're on a collision course. Advise you change course 20 degrees." Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees." The captain said, "I am the captain! Change course 20 degrees!" Message came back, "I am a seaman first class! You had better change course 20 degrees." By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send this message. "I am a battleship! Change course 20 degrees!" Back came the flashing light message, "I am a lighthouse. You choose!"

Pride can get you literally killed. Also, pride can kill your marriage. In her memoir of a truly dysfunctional family, in a book called The Liar's Club, Mary Carr tells of a Texas uncle in her family, who remained married to his wife, but did not speak to her for 40 years! After a fight over how much money she spent on sugar! One day, he took a lumber saw, some of you might know what that is, it must be a big saw, and sawed their house exactly in half and just nailed up planks over the new division of the house! He moved his half of the house behind some pine trees on the same acre, on the same lot. There they lived the rest of their lives in two separate half-houses, not speaking. Now, was that strength, never admitting you're wrong? Or was that weakness, never being able to repent?

At a former church, and this actually happened, I was called in by a couple in their 80's on a Saturday. They called me. They said this is urgent. They were re-arguing, word for word, a practiced fight they had been having for 50 years! It's funny, but it's not funny! Maintaining pride erases the possibility of peace. Pride can also make a fool out of you.

You've seen some of the talent shows where people are convinced that they can sing. The judges look up at each other as they are singing, and they ask the question, "Doesn't anybody love them enough to tell them?" You can't sing. Stop embarrassing yourself! For those of you who have loved me enough to tell me, thank you very much. I know that I can't sing. I'm making a joyful noise. We'll leave it at that.

A lady one day walked into the minister's office, and she was distraught, and she was filled with remorse, and she said, "I must confess my sin. I think I am the most beautiful woman in the world!" The minister leaned across his desk, and he said, "Sister, that is not a sin. That is a mistake."

Pride comes often from self-delusion. Again, I quote C. S. Lewis. He said, "It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to feel that I am the master of my own fate, that I run my own life, that I call my own shots, that I go it alone, but that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I cannot go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I cannot ultimately rely even on myself. I am dependent upon God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man – small, weak, limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion! It's not just a matter of pride, being an unfortunate little trait, and humility being an attractive little virtue; it's my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am! I am pretending to be God and not a man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, and that," he writes, "is the national religion of Hell."

Please, if there is anything to take away from this message, don't be like the cowardly Herod, doing wrong to cover wrong, to maintain a wrong view of reality that you must be powerful, and you must maintain your pride and prestige at all costs, even your relationship with God or others near you. Do not be allergic to the truth of weakness and faults and sin and your need of God. Choose this day whom you will serve. God? Self? Or the crowd that you play to? Amen.