

DOORS WE OPEN, DECISIONS WE MAKE

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Doors we open, decisions we make

Decisions! People make them every day of their lives, some minor with short term effects, others major with lifetime effects and many in between. Some seem fairly easy to make, with others we struggle which way to go, which doors to close and which to open. There are so many things that can influence the making of a decision, circumstances, family, friends, faith values, just to name a few.

The scripture passage read this morning tells what I would call a relational messy story. People make decisions based on various influences. Decisions that led to the death of John the Baptist. Even though this story has a gruesome ending and occurred nearly 2000 years ago, it is a story from which we can learn. A story in which we can see some common human tendencies found not only in these people from the past but also in this generation. Tendencies that potentially if followed without some evaluation may lead to decisions that may harm self or others.

So let's briefly review this story and the people and see what we might learn beginning with Herod

Herod appears to be one of the central figures in this passage. Mark identifies him as a king, although other resources identify him as a tetrarch, a governor of a province under Roman rule. He is the son of Herod the Great, the king that was responsible for the deaths of children under 2 years of age near the time of Jesus birth. His family tree shows numerous marriage entanglements and violence. Herod the great married multiple different women by which he had several sons. The Herod identified in this passage married Herodias, the wife of Philip, one of his half-brothers, and she was also Herod's niece by another half-brother. Into this picture comes John the Baptist. John, the prophet, who preaches repentance, the one who is to prepare the way for the Messiah. It looks like John's relationship with God and his concern for obedience to the Jewish law leads him in a decision to confront Herod and say "It was not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Of course, Herod as a ruler is in the public view. This statement made by John apparently was made in front of other people to include Herodias, his wife. Herodias, from the looks of it was hurt, humiliated, angry and because of this confrontation held a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. It is interesting to note, however, that this passage seems to imply that Herod protected John by placing him in prison, away from Herodias's access, because he feared and identified him as a righteous and holy man. He also, apparently liked to listen to John although perplexed by what John had to say. Then we are told that an opportune time comes.

This opportune time is for Herodias. Herod holds a birthday banquet for himself inviting his high officials, military commanders and leading men of Galilee. The daughter of Herodias, Herod's stepdaughter, who by name as identified from another source, is Salome dances for this group of people and pleases them. Herod then

promises with an oath to give her anything up to half his kingdom. It is doubtful he had the power or authority to do this since he was under Roman rule. Salome consults her mother Herodias on what to ask for. Herodias directs her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. She goes back, makes the request and Herod, because of his oath and his guests, orders her request to be fulfilled. The guests say and do nothing. The executioner does what he is told.

So what might we consider as some of the human tendencies we spoke about earlier?

What about the tendency to make decisions based more or less on human emotions or what one feels. Emotions/feelings are gifts of our creator. They are in some way part of all human decisions. Just imagine what it would be like without them. It seems life would be rather Blah. However emotions/feelings can assist us in making good decisions, but also, if not coupled with some self awareness and rational thought to decisions which result in negative consequences. Some of the decisions made by the people in this passage appear to be based more on their emotions/feelings and concerns for self rather than others.

I think it is possible to see in this passage that decisions were made influenced by emotions/feelings of fear, intimidation, hurt, humiliation, anger, bitterness and even possibly love. Also, by desires to impress or please others, and to save self from embarrassment,

Let's take Fear. Herod we are told feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man and protected him. Fear here led to John's protection. This fear may have been tinged with a sense of awe for who John was. We might also see fear in some of the dinner guests who may have disagreed with Herod's decision to fulfill Salome's request but due to fear of reprisal and negative consequences, by a powerful ruler, chose to remain silent.

What about Intimidation and saving face? Could it be that Herod, even though identified as a king, felt intimidated by his guests since he had made a promise with an oath in front of them to Salome, and to save himself from embarrassment and their disdain fulfilled her request although deeply grieved. And why did Herod make a promise to grant anything the girl asked for even to ½ the kingdom. It seems doing that could certainly get oneself into trouble. Was he trying to impress people with his status or just being impulsive and not thinking?

Hurt, humiliation, anger bitterness. Herodias allowed John's word to fuel these emotions leading to her desire for revenge and the decision to advise her daughter on what to request from Herod which led to John's death.

In Salome we might see emotions of affection/love for her mother wanting to please her or fear of losing her mother's acceptance and love or various other emotions/desires leading her to make a request that harmed another person. But I think we can also see another kind of love in John the Baptist, a love for God and love for others concerned with a public leader who was violating the Jewish law, and who might be looked upon as an example for those he ruled. A love such that he was willing to take a risk of losing his own life.

Now, granted, some of the emotions/feelings/desires here are straightforward and stated. Others more or less implied by the actions/behaviors of the people. For those implied we cannot be certain since we have not had conversations with these people, however, as part of humanity, I think many of us can see how some of these actions/behavior of the people in this passage could very well have resulted from the emotions, feelings and desires mentioned.

So many decisions. Could there have been other decisions. Yes, wise and good decisions that could have led to another outcome. But let us not just stop with this story but look at the context of where it is placed. On either side of this story we see Jesus and his disciples. Almost a total contrast to Herod and the people surrounding him. Jesus and his disciples were out among the people not in a palace, making decisions more for the welfare of others and not for self, We are told that Jesus went among the villages teaching and that he sent out the disciples with instructions to take nothing on their journey with but a few exceptions. The disciples proclaimed repentance, cast out demons and anointed the sick with oil and they were cured. In fact it was these stories which led Herod to want to identify Jesus as John the Baptist raised from the dead. In this desire, I think we can see some guilt and regret from Herod in making the decision to grant Salome's request.

Decisions, we all make them based on so many things. So what might we consider as some good foundations to making good and wise decisions? I would say that the most important foundation is our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, following to the best of our ability in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as he leads us as his disciples. And second to be guided by the words of scripture. To be guided not by one verse here and there but by the whole story of God and his people. We can learn and grow in making decisions from hearing the emotions/feelings expressed by the psalmists, by hearing the wisdom of proverbs, by seeing the history of the people of God, learning from them mistakes to avoid as well as examples of good. We can learn by walking with Christ and his disciples hearing his teachings. We can learn by hearing the testimony of his followers of who Jesus is, of his life, his teachings, his death, and Resurrection, all that he has done for us so that we might know and be with him now and for eternity. What a blessing

Some other types of what I would call foundations would include:

1. Consulting Informational resources: facts, circumstances etc. weighing all these aspects.
2. Consulting people who are trustworthy, who walk the path of faith, who will listen and in some way help to discern the best path to take or the doors to close and those to open.
3. Self awareness, being aware of what my emotions and feelings are saying to me, discerning what influence they are contributing to my decisions, being aware of how my personality and life experiences are influencing those decisions. Are they leading me to open doors that may have positive consequences or negative ones.

All of these, what I have called foundations, were a part of my decision to retire 4 years ago. That was a major decision for me. A decision that took me quite a long time evaluating all the different aspects always with the prayer God guide me in this

decision. Once I made it, I felt a sense of peace and even some excitement to see what opportunities might lay ahead. I have not regretted that decision.

All of humanity makes decisions every day and not all of them turn out the way we would like them. Some decisions are made in the moment and others with much deliberation. Some influenced by some of the human tendencies described earlier. Some where we have failed to hear and obey the voice of God. Others, where to the best of our ability, we have discerned Christ's leading. But in Christ there is always another door, another opportunity to go on. When we have failed, there is forgiveness and grace. When we have done our best there is a sense of peace. There is always hope as we trust in Christ to lead us.

Let me leave you with one of the many words of encouragement from scripture that have been part of my life and its decisions. It is taken from Isaiah 41 and is God speaking to His people. And God says " Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus, thank you for being with us, for leading us as we seek to be your faithful disciples. Teach and guide us as we make decisions that impact our lives and the lives of others. Be especially with those in leadership of all the nations that they may discern the best decisions to make for Your glory and the welfare of all Your people. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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