

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

'Ask of me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.'

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It is Herod's birthday, and with a birthday comes a gift; and what better gift to give a degenerate, incestuous monarch, but a dancing girl?

The girl dances; the girl pleases Herod. This puts it lightly. She delights him in just that way that a dancing girl might delight a man, according to his peculiar weakness.

But something odd happens. The girl is a gift. The gift dances, the gift pleases Herod, but then Herod seeks to please the girl. He seeks to please the gift.

'Ask of me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.'

What was given to serve Herod now becomes served by Herod. She who is to be a slave to his will, she has now enslaved.

Yet this poor dancing girl, having Herod's will in thrall does not know what to ask; so she seeks counsel from her mother. *'For what should I ask?' 'Ask for the head of John the Baptist.'*

A bloody demand.

Who is this man, John the Baptist?

He is *if you will have it, Elijah*, prophesied of old.

He is *the greatest of all men born of women*.

He is *a voice crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'*

He is the mouth of God, the tongue of the Most High, the *burden of the Word of the Lord*.

And Herodias, the mother of the dancing girl, wants his Word silenced.

So it is that John the Baptist was put to death, his head severed from his neck, and delivered *upon a platter*. *'And the king was exceedingly sorry.'*

A bloody demand.

Now let us speak of your birthday; a birth no doubt welcomed with joy; a birth no doubt announced to hundreds of friends and family, and inaugurated with gifts and letters and cards and laughter.

But before such joy, there was crying; before such joy there was suffering, *'for in pain shall you bring forth offspring.'*

It is a hard saying, but *in sin did your mother conceive you. And your thought has been only sin continually, 'for if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us', 'for we are born of flesh' and 'these are the things which belong to the flesh: fornication, immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.'*

So was the day of your birth. And do not think yourself any different than Herod on his.

Do not look to the left, do not look to the right, but *'commune with your own heart, and be still.'*

What desire presents itself before your heart? What pleasure beguiles the palace of your mind? What dances there, alluring you? What is it that *pleases you?*

Sure, if you are a red-blooded American male, it may be something as simple, as obvious, as carnal as the beauty of a dancing girl, the beauty of a neighbor girl, the beauty of an office girl. But our hearts are rarely so simple, so obvious. *'For the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can comprehend it?'*

'Commune with your own heart, and be still.' What dances there, alluring you? What is it that *pleases you?*

Is it ambition? Do you day dream of who you could have been? Who you would have been? If only you were not held back. If only you had married the right person. If only you had the right support, the right chance; if only. For we would never admit it, but such day dreams seem just.

Is it anger? Do you nourish your soul as it grows bitter against a needy friend, a needy parent, a thankless job, a thankless child? Do you sit idly by, watching anger blossom into hatred, as one watches the blossom of blood red roses? For we would never admit it, but hatred feels good.

Is it self-pity? Do you milk the feeling that you've had it hard? That no one has had it harder? That no one understands? That no one can understand? That you are alone in suffering the harrowing hell of this life? For we would never admit it, but such honeyed milk tastes sweet.

None of these things, you say, pleases you. They create in you dissatisfaction, acrimony, contempt, disgust. And yet these sins dance in your heart, and you do not stop them, for, though you may hate to say it, they *please you*.

Watch as these vices dance, and see how you become [not a king over them, but] a slave. No sooner than you have decided to not stop them, you soon begin to serve them. You give them expression. You complain to your friend, you complain to your spouse, you complain to the stranger; and even if they are all missing, you can always complain to your heart itself, for the dancing girl is only too eager to listen.

Could you live without entertaining your pet lusts? Your pet annoyances? Your pet envies? If you are a son of man, or a daughter of woman, then you share in the fate of all mortals: *'your thought is evil continually.'*

Yet the Word of Lord condemns them. The Word of the Lord seeks to cast them out, to cleanse the palace of your heart and mind, and to *'take captive every thought to the obedience of God.'* And yet you would not.

So you call out to the vices and sins of your soul *'dance on!'* And if they begin to fade, you beg, *'Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.'*

Sin is but a dancing girl, but she is born of her mother the devil, who is *more cunning than any of the creatures of the earth.*

'Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.'

'Give me the head of John the Baptist.'

'Give me the head of the prophet.'

'Give me the head of the mouth of God, the tongue of the Most High.' That that voice, that that Law might be silenced.

'He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.'

In this way did Herod murder John the Baptist. In this way does sin murder faith in your heart.

To those who have committed such murder, there is not only hatred and disdain for God's Law, there is fear of it. You hear it every day, how people run from the Lord's sentence. *'Don't judge me.'* *'I don't live according to some outdated rule-book.'* *'You can't force your religion on others.'* These are not words of disregard; they are words of fear; they are the words of those who have silenced the Law of God in their hearts, so that the dance can go on; and what they fear the most is that this Law may come back from the grave to accuse them again.

Some people say it explicitly, at the dinner table, on the news; but all men say it daily in their heart. *'Don't judge me.'* For we fear the judgment, and rightly so *'for if thou, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord who would stand?'*

Herod fears the resurrection of John, who accused him for marrying his brother's wife. We fear the resurrection of the voice of our own conscience who accuses us of marrying the myriad idols and sins, vices and shames which shackle our soul.

But John is not resurrected; and even as he was imprisoned, John pointed his disciples to another, a man named Jesus, whom he had once called *'The Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world.'*

Who is this man Jesus?

He is *the prince of peace.*

He is *God with us.*

He is *the Son of the Most High*

He is *the Word made flesh*.

But who is this man Jesus to us, *who are evil?*

He is *the sacrifice*.

He is *the atonement*.

He is forgiveness.

He is the *Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world*.

And this Lamb no man may kill; this forgiveness, no sin may bury in a grave and cast into the dust, for He is *the resurrection and the life, 'having died once, never to die again.'*

'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

The Law you have murdered in your heart. But grace this day comes to you. And not this day, but every day of your life, bought by the water and blood of Christ's pierced side.

Temptations will not cease, for the devil does not weary of his raging; but before this altar, the dance is over, and sacrifice is made; not in the wretched palace of your heart, but in the sapphire halls and clear-gold courts of the heavenly Jerusalem, where Christ the crucified awaits the resurrection from the dead of His beloved elect, that your soul be cleansed.

For we shall be in His sight, and we shall *see Him as he is*. And it will be terrifying, for *no man may see God, and live*. There, in the judgment you will see the book of all your works; the scroll of your wicked deeds. Then, you shall know your shame. Then, you will feel your guilt. And then, you will have nothing to say *for you shall be exceedingly sorry*. But the Lord Jesus will speak first:

'Ask of me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29.