



“A Banquet of Life”

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Mark 6:14-29

Dr. Brett Younger, a professor and friend of mine, also a previous pastor of Broadway Baptist in Fort Worth, wrote an article about a true American hero. No, not Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony or Martin Luther King Jr. This American hero is Joey “Jaws” Chestnut. On July 4, Joey Chestnut traveled to Coney Island to participate in, according to Younger, “a gut-busting, Independence Day showdown that provided drama, daring and indigestion.”

This all-American event was the Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Championship which has been around since 1972. The announcer was George Shea and this is some of his poetic commentary about the contestants: “His good cholesterol is low. His bad cholesterol is high. His BMI is borderline presidential.” “He stands before us like Hercules himself. Albeit a large, bald Hercules at an eating contest.” “This is like watching Picasso paint.”

Well, Chestnut won his 11th Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest title in twelve years. That’s better than LeBron James and Michael Jordan combined and twice as many championships as the Dallas Cowboys. Joey inhaled a staggering seventy-four hot dogs in ten minutes – a little less than one every eight seconds. By eating that many hotdogs, Joey consumed 22,000 calories, 1,332 grams of fat and 1,776 carbs.

Younger, of course, had many questions after witnessing this festival of belching and burping. He asked, “Is overindulgence a feat to be celebrated? Should bingeing be considered a sport? What is the over/under on the date of Joey’s death? Why is he still alive? Should anyone eat 74 hot dogs in 10 minutes while children starve? (To which his wife, Carol, mentioned that the good and clever people at Nathan’s make a point of donating 100,000 hot dogs to the Food Bank of New York City each July 4.) Should a cardiologist be doing the play-by-play? Should Pepto-Bismol be a sponsor? Would this be more appropriate on the Food Network than ESPN? What kind of parents raise their child to compete in a gorge-a-thon?”

These are all good questions to ask when we sit down at a restaurant for lunch or at the dinner table with our families. As a privileged people we don’t often wonder if we will have enough to eat or if we will be invited to the glorious banquet of life. We are blessed and fortunate to have many of our needs met. But often, we encounter those who aren’t at the table of the banquet of life. They are at another table, a table where they are malnourished, where they are ridiculed, where they are torn from their families, where they are seen as less than, where they are beaten and bruised in spirit and in body. Many people in our city, in our nation, and in our world are attending a banquet of death and despair. And it is our job as guests of Christ’s table to open up seats for all of God’s children.

Many of us don't realize that we live in a world where two banquets are happening. And to understand these two banquets, I think it is important for us to bear witness to this horrible banquet in our Gospel Lesson for today. This is a truly terrible story and I felt a pang in my stomach, not a hunger pain, but a pain in my soul having to say "Thanks be to God!" after a story like this. I thought about skipping this lectionary reading, especially since our children or youth were the scripture readers for today and Pastor Laura was very concerned about the harshness of death and violence in this text. We could've read the beautiful Psalm about the majesty and praise of God or we could've let our Bibles simply fall open to absolutely any other passage. It would've been much easier to skip ahead and read the happier story about Jesus feeding five thousand hungry people which follows right after Herod's horrible banquet. But I think these two tales, Herod's Birthday Banquet and the Feeding of the Five Thousand, were put together by Mark for a reason. These two stories are meant to be heard alongside each other.

Now, I am aware we all know the story of the feeding of the five thousand. But here it is again: Jesus said to his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." And so, they went away by boat but a huge crowd followed them. It got late and the disciples wanted to send away the crowd into the nearby villages to find food. But Jesus told the disciples, "You give them something to eat." The frustrated followers looked in the crowd for food and only found five loaves and two fish. And taking the loaves and fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves and divided up the two fish. Everyone ate and there were twelve basketfuls leftover.

Rev. Barbara Lundblad turned me on to this idea that you can see contrasts and oppositions in the story of the feeding of the five thousand. "Jesus withdrew to be alone... But a great crowd followed him. It was a deserted place... But it became an abundant place. The disciples said, 'Send the people away.'... Jesus said, 'You give them something to eat.' We have only five loaves and two fish... Yet more than five thousand ate with twelve baskets left over." Did you hear the oppositions? Alone... Crowd. Deserted... Filled. Send them away... Feed them. Too little... More than enough. This was Mark's way of really highlighting who Jesus was and that he came to bring a banquet of life to the world.

And so, when we pull back a bit, we notice this contrast between Jesus' banquet of life and Herod's banquet of death. Herod's banquet was in an extravagant palace while Jesus' banquet was in a deserted place. Herod's banquet was meant to feed the rich and powerful while Jesus' banquet fed everyone, everyone including women and children and the poor and the seekers and the privileged. Herod's banquet wasn't for a large crowd, but for a small group of important officials. Jesus' banquet was open to all. We have two stories of two banquets and we must hear about the painful death of the faithful John the Baptist in order to understand John's role of baptizing the world into a new and better banquet of life, the banquet where Jesus is the host.

But yes, we can't deny that the story of the beheading of John is horrific and gruesome. The powerful people in this text did terrible things. Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife, Herodias. Herodias was not just the former wife of Herod's half-brother, she was also the daughter of another of Herod's half-brothers. So, when Herod Antipas married Herodias, he was marrying his sister-in-law and his niece at the same time. It's like a real-life soap opera and a really gnarly and twisted family tree.

Herod Antipas's action of marrying his half-brother's wife was a clear violation of Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish law and John the Baptist publicly denounced the marriage. Because of this condemnation, Herodias was furious. Herod was angry, too, but like Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus, he genuinely did not want to kill a holy man. He didn't want John to die, it seems he actually liked listening and learning from John.

Unfortunately, also like Pilate, Herod chose cowardice over courage. Rather than stand up for what he believed, he gave in to selfish pride and the request of the harsh empire expectations. Herod ordered John beheaded and the head presented on a platter. Why would the people who put the preaching lectionary together include this horrific story? Where's the hope? It's clearly a story where evil triumphs over good. The righteous man loses his life. The weak and vengeful people get away with murder. It's a sordid tale of anger and revenge, resentment and death. The name of Jesus is never even mentioned in the text for today and we clearly see what happens when the empire throws a party.

I know you are just as confused as I am that Mark doesn't say anything about Jesus' birth or give a resurrection account, and yet we get this extended section on Herod Antipas and John the Baptist. Mark's Gospel is so short and to the point that we hardly know that Jesus is the Messiah, but we get intricate details of Herod's marital situation, family debauchery, and excessive birthday party. Why do we get such a comprehensive account of this banquet of death? If you have been in Wednesday night Bible study on the Gospel of Mark, you would remember that this gospel was written for a persecuted people who were scared and needed assurance. Jerusalem had either just fallen, or was about to fall, and the early Christians weren't sure if they were going to live or die. They felt like evil was all around them and that the empire was winning.

And in this story, evil seems to win. And it seems like we have more banquets of death than banquets of life, right? Countless millions have suffered horribly throughout time, violently and senselessly in the name of religion, in the name of racial injustice, in the name of greed or power or anger or fear and often for no reason at all. Evil seems to win out again and again. The banquet of death gets bigger and more lavish and more highly attended.

And that is why Mark tells this terrible tale. The story of the beheading of John makes it crystal clear that for prophets, for those who speak out for God, the work is risky. When we call out injustice, we shouldn't expect accolades. When we speak the truth to those in power there may be a bitter price to be paid. But, no matter what may happen, God's plan cannot be stopped. John Chrysostom was a great preacher of the fifth century. He said of the beheading of John the Baptist, "Herod cut off his head, but he did not cut off his voice." No matter what people may do, the voice of the gospel will not be silenced. As prophets of a life-giving banquet, we must risk everything to make certain that everyone is welcome. The question is: are we John or are we Herod? Are we setting the table for a banquet that excludes people, that harms people, or that fulfills our selfish desires? Or are we pulling chairs up to God's table made of wood from the cross, a table where all of God's people, all who are made in God's image are given as much food, as much love, as much acceptance, as much forgiveness, and as much grace as they can handle? That is a banquet of life.

We're glad, too, when we have a clear choice to take a meaningful stand. But clear choices in life are few, especially if we spend at least some of our time living in a banquet hall where there is so much power and so much entertainment and so much to eat and drink that the faithful choices can become hard to see. There are systems in which we all participate - people going without food and shelter in a nation of abundance, people not getting medical care because of no other reason than lack of money, people hating one another simply because of the color of their skin. There are evils born out of power and privilege and pride.

But... but the message of our faith says that evil does not have the last word. Herod does not win. Herodias does not win. Evil does not win. The banquet of death does not win. With joy we can shout out that God's world does not end with either the whimper of a starving child or the blast of a nuclear bomb; it ends with the lavish and fruitful and filled table of God where everyone has a seat. There is a banquet of life for everyone, we simply need to make the choice to throw a party where Jesus is the guest of honor.

That is our choice. Herod chose loyalty to the empire. He presided over a banquet of death. Rev. Lundblad had this to say, "Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he couldn't risk his own reputation to spare John's life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions. Feeding hungry crowds was not on Herod's agenda. Of course, Rome fell centuries ago, doomed by its expansive victories – too many troops needed in too many far-flung places. That is always the temptation for any nation, including our own."

As I think about Lundblad's quote, I wonder, is it possible to maintain an empire and feed people who are hungry? Is it possible to maintain an empire and welcome all people to the table? Is it possible to maintain an empire and multiply good in the world? It seems that the banquet of death and the leftovers of the empire have almost always been destruction and demise, even in the name of peace and security. There is always enough money for weapons, but never enough to feed those who are hungry. There is always enough greed, but never enough hospitality. There is always enough anger, but never enough forgiveness. There is always enough pride, but never enough humility. The banquet of death is lavish. But it was into such a world that Jesus came with an invitation to a different banquet. Jesus laid out the table cloth, the silverware, the dishes, and the napkins, but when the hour grew late, the disciples said, "This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so that they may go into the village and buy food for themselves." Everything rational in us shouts, "Good idea!" Herod Antipas would have said, "Great idea, send them away... only the important, the powerful, the rich can stay and eat." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

It is up to us to give them something to eat! How can we prepare a banquet of life for people this week? If Jesus calls out to us and says, "You give them something to eat," how will we respond? Will we make sure that all children of this world don't go to bed hungry, don't go to bed without a roof over their head, don't go to bed without parents who love them, don't go to bed without feeling safe and secure? Will we write letters to our elected leaders and encourage them to use their power and privilege to prepare a banquet of life rather than one of lavish empire? Will we find ways to include everyone at the table?

And when we bring our loaves of bread and couple of fish to the banquet of life in the name of Jesus, it will multiply goodness in the world. Bring who you are to the banquet of life. Bring your small gifts to the banquet of life. Bring your broken body to the banquet of life. Bring your doubts and your insecurities to the banquet of life. Bring your power and privilege to the banquet of life. Bring all of who you are to Jesus and let Jesus multiply your offerings so that there will be a banquet of life for all.

Amen.