
Beware the Birthday Party

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Mark 6:14-29

In recent years my family has been engaged in the rite of passage commonly known in our culture as--the birthday party circuit. The birthday party has changed a great deal from what I remember as a child. In my early years, most parties were at someone's home. If you had cake and presents, you were more than halfway home. I do not ever remember ever receiving a "goodie bag" upon departure.

This is no longer typical. In the past decade I have attended and hosted my own children's parties everywhere from gymnastic facilities, nature centers, museums, roller rinks, catering facilities, amusement parks, and pools to name just a few. The at-home party has been transformed to now include giant bouncy structures, magicians, and live farm animals.

When my kids were toddlers, there was one party that could immediately strike terror in our hearts at the opening of the colorful invitation. I present to you the Chuck E Cheese party.

If you have never been to Chuck E Cheese, suffice it to say it is a cacophony of screaming children, loud games, clanging tokens, and long waits as you present a pile of hard won tickets to purchase items such as plastic beetles, erasers, and double bubble bubble gum. It is accompanied by dreadful pizza, syrupy fruit punch, a large costumed mouse who dances and sings during the birthday song, and periodic bursts of mechanical puppetry entertainment.

Most horrific for parents of small children are the large plastic climbing tubes that snake their way high through the ceiling with no identifiable path. Think McDonalds Play Place on steroids. Now, when the children are old enough to navigate these tubes by themselves, I'm sure they are lovely. They are entertaining and a wonderful outlet for children's energy.

However, when you are dealing with toddlers, they are a nightmare. The children have a tendency to get lost and stuck. They are in danger of being crushed by unwieldy and awkward larger kids who have no business being in those tubes. As a parent you have basically two choices to ensure your child's survival.

First, you can try to listen for your child's distinctive screams from the ground. After locating them you can then attempt to provide vocal guidance above the other noise to guide them to the exit. A bribe of extra tokens is completely appropriate or a promise of a personal encounter with Chuck E himself.

The other tactic is to enter the tubes yourself as a guide or reconnaissance force. You might think this is the obvious choice. But if you are thinking that way, you haven't tried it. These tubes are not built for adults. I can testify to you today that if you are a 5'11" woman, there is no graceful way to follow your child in those tubes. You will exit bruised, grumpy and ready to shove any adorable child out of your way just to escape. Their lives will no longer have meaning as your head pounds and you desperately hope the hosting parents will cue the birthday child to start opening presents.

There is something about a birthday party that can bring out the worst in us.

Children, who have been best friends all year, scream when they realize the gift they picked out is not actually theirs. Cutting the cake into equal slices becomes a diplomatic effort fraught with icing laden corners or extra flowers---certain to ruin long held alliances. Children, already on the margins, may find themselves completely excluded or ignored if the birthday child was forced to invite the entire class.

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It certainly did for King Herod. Prior to his birthday party he was willing to tolerate John the Baptist. Granted his wife was not fond of him and wanted revenge. But, prior to the party he had been content to have John languish in prison. He was able to still see John for who he was, a righteous and holy man. He even enjoyed listening to him. Mark tells us he was perplexed. But before the party Herod did not find that ambiguity intolerable. He was willing to stand against his wife who wanted John the Baptist dead and refuse her vengeful spirit.

But he got a little carried away at the birthday party.

He was the center of attention. The courtiers, officers, and leaders of the community were all assembled to pay him homage. He wanted things to go well and have the party reflect well on him. When Salome dances, he is thrilled. She is a show stopper. He was so pleased with the dance that he makes the grand gesture. Worthy of any fraternity party boast, he offers the daughter whatever she would like. She, guided by her mother asks for the head of John the Baptist.

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Herodias was certainly willing to press her advantage. She knew her husband respected John the Baptist. But, her own desire to see him dead took over any concern she had about Herod. Having publicly promised Salome anything, even half the kingdom, he had to make good on the oath. Otherwise the gathered community would lose confidence. In all likelihood his officers could refuse to serve him had he not kept his word. The very stability of the community could be compromised.

So King Herod does something he never would have imagined. After holding strong against his wife's desire for vengeance he now gives the order. He witnesses the results on a platter. What should have been holding a sign of his generosity and hospitality is now a reminder of his loss of himself. John will no longer perplex him, but haunt him.

When Herod hears of Jesus' acts of power he can only connect them to his own guilt. This type of manifestation of power must somehow be connected to what he lost when he allowed the beheading of John. He will now have to pay the price.

There is a terrifying awareness that can emerge when we realize we have compromised our integrity. We discover our own capacity to be swept away. To be consumed with pride, arrogance, or greed and abandon those we know to be holy and righteous.

So where is the good news here?

Good news is sometimes sobering news. It may be news we wish we didn't receive. But it is good, because it is truthful. We are capable of unthinkable things as individuals, communities, and nations. We have darkness as well as light.

But this text while disturbing is not the end. The gospel does not end with John the Baptist and Herod, but leads us toward Jesus and ourselves. It means we can take the parts of us that are too close to Herod and present them to Jesus. This Jesus, Christ crucified and risen has something very different to offer us. He is not promising a guilty ghost haunted future.

God does not trap us in an awareness of darkness without the promise of light.

Paul reminds us, that we are chosen by God "in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love,.In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his

grace that he lavished on us. ..[we are] marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; it is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory."

Now that is a cause for celebration.

Amen

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