

Mark 6:14-29

Let's recap, because I'm going to play with this story and we should be clear about how it goes in its original form. Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, had violated Levitical law by marrying his brother's wife Herodias, and John the Baptist had called him out for it. Now John's in prison for his presumption. But Herod finds John strangely compelling. Mark says Herod "was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him." "And yet he liked to listen to him."

Like the buffoonish king Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, Herod gives a party for a bunch of local dignitaries and his daughter dances for them. She's a big hit, and Herod's throwing his weight around, feeling pretty prestigious, and offers her whatever she'd like as a reward "even half of my kingdom" which is definitely not something he's authorized to do as a deputy of Rome but again reminds us of king Ahasuerus. Prompted by her mother who's mad at John, the girl asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And Herod is surprised and dismayed, but feels like he can't back out of it now in front of everybody, and so orders that John be beheaded.

The final score appears to be Herod 1, John the Baptist zero. But wait.

Let's try it another way. Let's say that John the Baptist has called out Herod for violating Levitical law and he's in prison, and Herod's having this party and his daughter asks for John's head on a platter. BUT Herod says to her, "Oh, no, honey, I can't do that. That's brutal and inhumane and deeply creepy. John the Baptist is a lot of trouble, but he doesn't deserve to die." In this version, Mrs. Herod is definitely mad at him but, probably more important, the guests are taken aback at Herod's deference to the disrespectful prophet. They murmur a little bit in the moment, and then when they've gone home, the rumors begin to fly that Herod's

kind of a softy, not really the tough law-and-order type you want representing the Empire to Galilee. Herod's rivals seize the opportunity to undermine him at the next meeting with the higher-ups. Eventually either Herod is deposed as tetrarch or he's quietly passed over for promotion. He's definitely out of the fast lane. But on the other hand, John the Baptist is alive and continuing to utter his perplexing but compelling prophecies which Herod likes to listen to.

It was fear that motivated Herod to fulfil his daughter's bloodthirsty request. He was afraid of looking weak or ridiculous in front of the courtiers and officers. He was afraid of the career consequences of not looking tough enough. He was probably right, too, as per the second version of the story. But at what cost?

Let me continue my hypothetical alternative. Everyone leverages Herod's apparent softness for their own advantage, and Herod finds himself frozen out of the high-level meetings he used to go to. Having a little more time on his hands, he visits the prison more often and listens to more of John's teachings. Also, having lost any credibility as a tyrant, he experiments with the exercise of soft power by issuing rulings that favor the common people. Maybe he lowers the tax on fishing nets, or settles some legal disputes in favor of the poor. Galileans sit up and take notice, counting themselves lucky to be ruled by a relatively humane representative of the Roman Empire. One day when a rival seeks to stab Herod in a crowd (yes, I'm borrowing liberally from *Julius Caesar*, sue me), members of the crowd stop him and carry Herod to safety. He lets John out of prison and Galilee blossoms with thriving people.

See, this story follows immediately after the story in which Jesus has sent out the twelve to manifest the kingdom of God. "They went out and proclaimed that all should repent," or re-orient themselves away from Empire and toward the values of God who cherishes every human

being. King Herod heard of it *because*, John having been executed, people were saying that maybe Jesus was John raised from the dead. [John and Jesus were about the same age, so Jesus isn't been envisioned as literally John in a new body, but as being animated by the spirit that had animated John, the way Archbishop Romero's spirit rose up among the poor of El Salvador after he'd been murdered.] Maybe Jesus is John raised from the dead, because when God is doing something, you can't stop it. God just goes around your obstacles. You being a tough guy may help your career in the short term, but it doesn't make God stop and go away. On the other hand, dropping the tough guy act and cooperating with what God is doing can have some amazing results.

I don't know if you all have been following the news about Nikole Hannah-Jones and the University of North Carolina, but in case you haven't, I'm going to give you the nickel version. <sup>i</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones is a journalist who grew up in Waterloo and spearheaded the NYTime's 1619 Project, a long-form journalism project which reframes American history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative. Conservatives hated it. So then Hannah-Jones, who was being hired by the University of North Carolina to hold a prestigious journalism chair, suddenly found that the position would not be tenured. Why is that? Because a major donor to the J-school, Walter Hussman, "expressed concerns" about the hire to the chancellor and the J-school dean and members of the board. *That* caused a lot of distress and indignation among admirers of the 1619 Project, journalists, and African Americans. Just recently the mega-donor said "Never mind," and faded away into the background again. But another journalist recounted a meeting he had with Walter Hussman that really reveals the centering or orientation that this guy, and

guys like him, act from.

The journalist, Joe Killian<sup>ii</sup>, says that Hussman began their conversation by asserting common ground with him as journalists. This is a common rhetorical device that reporters use to get people to talk, and Joe noticed it. But, he says, Hussman played reporter for only a few years before he was made publisher of a paper in the family media dynasty.

When I was 27 years old I was a beat reporter on a daily newspaper going to fires, murder scenes, protests and government meetings. I practically slept in the newsroom, which was much nicer than my apartment, and took side gigs to afford to sleep indoors and eat while reporting. That sort of experience -- slowly clawing your way up from smaller to larger newsrooms, being mentored by veteran reporters, slowly earning bigger beats and more responsibility over many years -- is what I'm supposed to assume I share with someone who says "I was a reporter." Those are, as it happens, experiences I do share with Nikole Hannah-Jones. As a Black woman, she had to work longer and harder than I did to get ahead in newsrooms. With more grit and talent, she's earned much more success. But we both worked our way up from working class roots.

Neither of us were, in our mid twenties, handed news outlets by our families. Neither of us were allowed to lose enormous amounts of money in years-long, heavily political newspaper wars until we crushed our rivals, assumed dominance and expanded our intergenerational empires. Hussman's . . . name isn't on UNC-Chapel Hill's journalism school because of his staggering reporting achievements.

Understanding, as he must, the difference between his CV and that of Nikole Hannah-Jones, he still felt the need to tell Susan King, dean of the J-School and UNC-Chapel Hill, he was against her hire. King said thanks for the input, but the J-School would make the decision.

Did Hussman respect the decision of the dean, herself a pioneering woman in journalism? . . . No. He contacted the chancellor. He contacted the vice chancellor in charge of financial giving. . . .

. . . , this was enormously inappropriate. . . . His \$25 million donation to the school gave him information and access few alums enjoy.

This story interests me because it's so clear where Hussman thinks power lies—where he centers himself—and where it turns out to lie, which for once is not with his big donations or his political allies. He's like Herod in Mark's version, threatened by the upstart prophet and convinced that he must crush her in order to maintain his power. The dean of the J-school is like Herod in my alternative version (sort of), aware of the power structure and the possible consequences of not complying with it, but *centered around* the power of truth-telling and

integrity. In this case it kind of worked out, [although UNC lost Hannah-Jones; she's joined Howard University so the reward for the dean of the J-school is muted] and the alternative Herod prevailed, which is lovely. Of course, it doesn't always work out like that. John the Baptist did get beheaded, and other journalists have been squashed. The point is that somehow, some way, the prophet always rises up and God's ends get accomplished. When John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus rose up and commissioned disciples. The world operates the way the world operates, but even at its worst, there are disciples out there curing the sick and casting out demons. The world operates the way the world operates, but another way is possible. Another way is possible, because God never quits, and the kingdom of God is always at hand. That is the good news in which this grim story is embedded.

Let us pray. You call us, O Lord, to live what we know, to challenge injustice, and speak the truth, even when speaking out brings us suffering. By your Spirit give us grace to remain faithful to you in all things. We pray for those who suffer persecution because of their commitment to right, for all who are oppressed, and for those whose voices have been silenced. Give us the courage to tell their stories and witness to your love, for we pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Here's the full-price version: <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2021/06/03/unc-mega-donor-walter-hussman-denies-exerting-pressure-over-hannah-jones-hiring/>

<sup>ii</sup> *North Carolina Policy Watch*, Raleigh NC