

Sunday, July 15, 2012: Mark 6:14-29

by [Jennifer Moland-Kovash](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue

When my son was about five years old (he's currently a very old seven) we spent an afternoon with a group of friends. The kids disappeared to play in the basement, and the parents gathered around in the kitchen to catch up. We snacked and told stories. There was lots of laughter. It was the kind of carefree, laughter-all-around gathering that I dearly love. Then my son and his best friend came upstairs, both in tears.

"He hit me!" the friend accused.

My son—hit someone? He's never been a hitter. So I was shocked—outraged, horrified, confused—especially when he admitted that he had hit his friend. And in a swift moment I decided and spoke: "If you can't behave, we have to go home."

The full story was that my son intended only to give his friend the kind of lighthearted punch exchanged among friends, but he had a bit more *oomph* behind his hand than either of them expected. No one was hurt, and it hadn't been malicious. But by the time that story came out, we were saying our hasty regrets and leaving.

I still don't know if the offense warranted leaving the party, but once I had said the words, I didn't think I could stay. How could I, in the future, set out credible consequences for my child if I changed my mind about this one? What would my friends—other parents who make similar statements and follow through—think if I went back on my word? So we packed up our things and went home for an afternoon that was much less fun than the one we'd been having. Neither my son nor I was happy with how events turned out.

In this Sunday's lectionary passage, Herod doesn't speak out of anger or frustration; instead it's the opposite. Sated from an evening held in his honor, filled with good food and drink, he's quite pleased with daughter Herodias and the entertainment she's provided for his party. So he makes her an offer: I will give you anything you desire.

He seems to anticipate a request for property or riches, given his offer of “even half of my kingdom.” I wonder if the girl had visions of land or jewels or money dancing through her head when she went to her mother (also named Herodias). Perhaps she was already imagining a much different life for herself. But instead of any of those things, the girl’s mother instructs her to ask for John’s head on a platter. Did Herod see that as a possibility? Surely he knew about the grudge his wife held against the Baptizer. John was in Herod’s prison, after all, because Herod was trying to appease his wife—and perhaps keep her from killing John herself.

There’s a collective “ugh” from modern readers when the girl asks for John’s head. Most of our society is too civilized to comprehend such a violent show of death; thankfully, a human head on a platter is not a common sight. Is this death sentence more shocking because it comes from a girl at the behest of her mother? Because it happens at a party? Or is it Herod’s spinelessness that makes us queasy?

“The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.” It’s hard to establish or maintain authority when we get connected to a statement that we later regret.

I have little sympathy for Herod: stand up for what you believe to be right, you spineless moron, I want to admonish him. The scripture tells us that Herod actually liked to listen to John, even if he was perplexed by what he heard. And Herod feared John, though apparently not as much as he feared losing his credibility among his peers. Not entirely unlike Pilate, who was intrigued, perplexed, but ultimately unwilling to go against the crowd, Herod caves on what we might see as the right and just thing to do in order to be faithful to a promise he made.

There’s the rub, right? On the surface, remaining faithful to a promise seems like a good thing. We usually praise people who uphold their oaths. But clearly there are situations when there’s more to consider. Being a flip-flopper is far better than standing firmly on the wrong side of justice or life. We can talk about politicians and world leaders who change their minds. We could lift up examples of those who have stood firmly committed to their record on an issue, and those who have voted or spoken on both sides of an issue. But that doesn’t help me be a better parent—and it doesn’t keep John the Baptizer alive.

I made my son apologize before we left the party. After we both calmed down, we had a conversation about our choices and the impact they have. I have since

decided that I should have thought through the impact of my words before speaking them. I don't think that my decision was wrong—my regret about my words is far more selfish: I was having fun and wanted to stay at the party.

Being consistent and following through on statements that have a consequence is important, but there would have been value in the interactions after the apology between my son and his friend. And more difficult, but ultimately more valuable for me, would have been the conversation among the parents about what happens when someone who holds the power changes her mind or goes back on her word.