

July 15, Ordinary 15B (Mark 6:14-29)

Put your ear to the ground. You will not detect a single note of good news in the story of Herod, Herodias, and John.

by [Moffett Churn](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue

Sandwiched between Jesus' sending of the Twelve and their return is the story of John the Baptist's death. Flashing back to my Sunday school days, John's beheading joined David's slaying of Goliath and Delilah's shearing of Samson at the top of the list for holding my attention. For different reasons, the story still insists on being heard.

In an unusual display of flourish, Mark spares no detail in painting the backdrop for Herod's brooding over the question, "Who is Jesus?" His narrative excess allows this subplot to push its way into the foreground. But this story isn't really about Herod. Neither is it about John, who sets the plot in motion but then plays his part from offstage. Also pulling strings from behind the scenes is Herod's wife, Herodias, aka Herod's brother's ex. She wants John put down for meddling in their affairs—but despite Herod's herculean ability to capitulate, he can't accommodate his wife because he fears John. So instead of taking the bull by the horns, Herod has John taken into custody. Still stewing, Herodias sees an opportunity when Herod decides to bedazzle himself with a birthday party. Cuing her daughter to provide the evening's entertainment, she sets up the creepiest part of the story. The girl's dancing so pleases Herod that he tells her she can have whatever she wants. So it's checkmate for Herod and John's head for Herodias.

You can put your ear to the ground and listen for as long as you like. You will not detect so much as a single note of good news in this story. It's where the story shows up that makes it a must-read. It comes just as Jesus puts his disciples on the same collision course that he is on. If this story is about anyone, it's about us. In an all-points bulletin to disciples, then and now, just in case we're getting full of ourselves and thinking that following Jesus is going to bring us glory and advantage

and ever-increasing success, Mark says: Think again. Following Jesus might get you in hot water up to here.

“Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems,” writes Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood, “and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of the problems.”

Once upon a time, in a faraway place, my husband and I were the organizing copastors of a new church. I’m not sure there’s any way to describe the community that emerged from the seeds God had sown there except to say that you could smell the gospel. We hurdled our way over many obstacles during the 17 years we shepherded that congregation, but the trip wire that was hardest to avoid was the yardstick other people brought out to measure our success. And by “other people” I include some of the church growth specialists in my own denomination. Over the first three years, we were expected to show growth rates that rarely occur outside the Bible Belt. And over the next decade and a half, while we soared incarnationally—becoming one of the few multicultural, inclusive, fully accessible churches in the region—it kept confounding me that numerical growth was still the only instrument used to take our pulse.

I remember one conversation in particular. I was on the phone with someone in the loan program we had been working with, and she asked me, “Why do you think the church isn’t growing faster?” Looking up at the cross one of our members hewed out of ceiling beams from another member’s home, then looking down at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer book on my desk, I took a deep breath and said, “I suppose there isn’t a huge market for the message, ‘Jesus bids you come and die.’ I don’t see people lining up around the block for that.” I wasn’t being glib.

This was about the same time *The Prayer of Jabez* was starting to get a lot of play, and the whole notion of pairing Christianity with prosperity was catching on. Books chronicling this approach were flying off the shelves, and who could blame anyone for lapping it up? If someone’s offering cash and cruises for following Jesus, I’ll be the first to sign up.

But is this good news, or just titillating news? Like Salome’s seductive dance, is it an aphrodisiac that leads to death? Mark’s Jesus has a habit of warning people not to talk up his miracles. Apparently he knows people will fall all over themselves to see

some special effects. Not that there's anything wrong with being a Marvel superhero, if what you're going for is a big box office. But Jesus didn't come to attract an audience. He came to make disciples. And he still calls people to take up a life that, one way or another, has a cross deeply embedded in it.

C. S. Lewis said, "Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead." Following Jesus is not about taking center stage or taking up a heroic quest. It's about a suffering God who bids us come and die so we can rise and dance to the tune of our true humanity. Is there a line around the block yet?