

10Pentecost, Matthew 14:13-21
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
August 2, 2026

Before we begin this morning, I want to add a few lines to the Gospel reading, specifically the lines from Matthew 14:10,12. Our text follows them with verses 13-21. These additional lines add important context to the theme of the lectionary for today. From the gospel of Matthew the extra lines tell us that Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded in prison. John's disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard this, he went away in a boat to a deserted place.

Doesn't Herod Antipas remind you of a bully who is determined to get his own way no matter how foolish and cruel he looks? His cruelty doesn't serve him any purpose and ultimately doesn't do him any good in his pursuit of power and control.

One of the first things we learn when we are children is that we like to be in control. We want things to go our way. We want to decide when to take a bath or go to bed. We want to choose what to watch during TV time. We want to decide when everybody should go home from the park. Later in life, we want to drive a car, define our own lifestyles, and make our own schedules. We want to be the captain of our ship and chart our own course to get from point A to point B. The funny thing is, the older we get, the more we discover that the course is not straight. It is full of twists and turns and ups and downs making the road between point A and point B difficult to follow.

Winds blow. Storms arrive. Plans change. Even our best intentions sometimes don't produce the outcomes we hoped for. We want control, but what is important is the power that is behind the control. Perhaps wisdom helps us realize that power and control are not the same thing. The Scriptures this morning introduce us to three very different people who each

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encounter power. One tries to hold onto it. One wrestles with it. One gives it away. And by the end, we discover that God's understanding of power is almost the opposite of our own.

Herod Antipas represents political power at its worst. He wields his power out of fear. He fears losing status among his people and among his peers. He feels his moral legitimacy threatened when John the Baptist pointed out the unlawful nature of his marriage to his own half-brother's wife. He kills John the Baptist in order to avoid being publicly embarrassed. Herod uses his power selfishly to retain his seat on the throne.

In the Genesis text, Jacob uses power in a somewhat different way. He used it to manipulate his brother Esau into giving away his birthright as the eldest son. He deceived his own father Isaac into thinking He, Jacob, was Esau in order to receive the blessing of the birthright. He tried to outmanipulate his uncle Laban in order to marry Laban's youngest daughter Rachel. His whole life has been to win by way of deception.

Then, while he was alone one night making plans to defend himself against Esau's wrath, he wrestled with a man until daybreak. In this fight, he cannot use his power of deception, he cannot outsmart or outbargain. In the end, the man did not overpower Jacob and Jacob did not overpower the man. But the man left Jacob with a permanent reminder of their struggle. Jacob was left with a damaged hip and a permanent limp; a permanent, physical scar from his struggle. He was humbled by the encounter and Jacob's humility and surrender to a truce became his greatest victory. The man changed Jacob's name to Israel, that means "Wrestles with God." With the new name came a new identity and a blessing from God. The old Jacob had sought control over others. The new Jacob, now called Israel, received a new self-less power through his surrender to God.

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Now turning to the Gospel, notice how Jesus manifests power. He has just been told of the murder of his cousin and good friend John the Baptist. After slipping away by himself for a moment of grieving he does not return filled with rage. He is not trembling with fear. He sees the crowds of people waiting for him and he feels compassion for them. Jesus feels a deep guttural sense of empathy and care for them. He does not coerce or threaten or attempt to manipulate them. He decides to feed them and to heal them.

You see, there are two extremes in the way that power operates in the world. One of those extremes is exemplified by Herod Antipas, the other is exemplified by Jesus. Herod uses power to protect himself. He operates out of fear in an attempt to control people. He takes life away from others and hoards material things selfishly. The end of the use of his power was always death.

On the other end of the power spectrum, Jesus doesn't protect himself, he pours himself out for others. He uses power to pour out compassion and liberates rather than controls people. He gives to others an opportunity for a full life rather than taking life away. Instead of hoarding resources he multiplies them. The end of the use of Jesus' power is loving abundance.

Jacob is the perfect illustration of the movement between those two extremes. He starts out his life resembling Herod, and after he wrestles with the man – who is really an angel from God – he begins to resemble Jesus. Isn't that an opportunity that we human beings have today, too?

The temptations that Herod fell victim to sound awfully familiar in our modern world. Think of Herod Antipas's behavior throughout scripture. He had been very controlling and

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manipulative, traits that he erroneously believed gave him power. At this time, Herod was worried about maintaining his image. To do that he lost his integrity by killing an innocent man. He sacrificed the truth that John was bringing him for popularity. His focus was on protecting his kingship instead of protecting his people. He mistook the influence he had on others by force with moral authority. The church is not immune from those temptations. Every community and human organization - families, businesses, schools, universities and governments - has to decide whether their inherent power exists to preserve itself or to benefit and bless others.

From the first time I engaged with the story of Jacob when I was myself involved in EfM, Education for Ministry. I have identified with Jacob's plight; not so much in the dream about the ladder, but in this story about wrestling with God. It seems to me that every one of us wrestles at some point or another, not necessarily physically. We don't all come away with a limp. But we wrestle spiritually with questions like: Who am I really? What am I afraid of? What is my purpose? Am I willing to take a risk and pursue that which I have been nudged toward but have been resisting?

God doesn't force Jacob to become Israel, he allows and empowers him to become Israel. Transformation is greater and more everlasting than domination.

At the time Herod killed John the Baptist, he was in the middle of hosting a banquet. His banquet ended with the loss of life. The banquet that Jesus served in feeding the five thousand ended with twelve baskets of food left over. Herod started with copious amounts of food and drink. Jesus started with five loaves and two fish. Herod's banquet is defined by luxury, excess and egomania. Jesus' meal for the many is defined by simplicity, generosity

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and compassion. Herod's kingdom consumes and devours. The kingdom of God feeds and nourishes and sustains. Herod slavishly guards his own honor. Jesus gives himself away.

My friends, the point of the sermon today is that real power is not the ability to control others. Real power, the power that God wants us to possess and put to use is the willingness to be transformed by Him so completely that our strength is used as a blessing. We each exercise some form of power every day - as a parent, a manager, a supervisor, a friend, a helper, a volunteer, a teacher, or, for some of us, a priest. The question is not whether we have power, but whether we use our power to serve others or not.

Will we wield our power like Herod? Or will we receive it like Jacob and allow God to shape and form us, using our power the way Jesus did? Will we choose to be someone who inflicts wounds, or someone who seeks to heal? Would you rather wield a sword or break bread? That is the paradox of the Gospel: the hands that break bread prove stronger than the hand that holds a sword, and the person willing to limp with God's blessing is ultimately more powerful than the ruler who stands tall upon another's fear. May we leave willing to walk with Jacob's limp rather than sit on Herod's throne, because the one who has wrestled with God and been changed is far stronger than the one who has merely conquered others. Amen.