



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Upside Down Compassion"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On March 12, 2023, from Matthew 14:1-21

There is a modern proverb which says, "If you're not at the table, you're probably on the menu." It is typically employed to illustrate the need for diverse representation in the places where decisions are being made, or as Aaron Burr famously called it in the musical *Hamilton*, "The Room Where it Happens." Many of our youth and parents have this song memorized, "No one really knows how the game is played, The art of the trade, How the sausage gets made, We just assume that it happens, But no one else is in the room where it happens."

When there is not adequate representation in "the room where it happens," when people are at the table where decisions are being made, the perspectives and needs of other people are usually forgotten, or worse, people end up on the menu. For instance, throughout American history, it has been common practice for groups of men to sit around tables in board rooms and make decisions for women that radically impact their bodies and their lives, with no women at the table or in the room where it happens. This has had disastrous consequences for women and our entire society, which is why so much energy has been put into diversifying the tables, getting women off the menu, and into the room where it happens.

There has been some progress in this effort to increase the representation of women at the tables and board rooms, yet more work is still needed. However, my question today is what do we do when there is representation at the table in the room where it happens, and the outcome is still disastrous? This Lent and Women's History Month we've been looking at stories of women in the gospel of Matthew and in our text today from the gospel of Matthew, women are in the room where it happens and at the table where decisions were being made, yet the result was the brutal execution of John the Baptist, whose severed head was served up on a silver platter.

The reason John was on the menu is that he had explicitly condemned Herod's plans to marry his brother's wife. When the announcement of their engagement was made public, John spoke truth to power by reminding the ruler that regardless of his status as Tetrarch of Galilee, he was still subject to the law, which stated brothers were forbidden from engaging in "wife swaps." Because of the vulnerable status of women in Jewish society, if a man died, his brother was required to marry their widow for protection and support. However, it was unlawful for a man to take their brother's wife as their own while their brother was still alive. It was not only illegal, but wildly exploitative for brother to trade their wives like cattle or bounty.



Before your stomach begins to turn at this story and you lose your appetite for lunch, you should know it was Herod the Great, Phillip and Herod's father, who made the arrangement and it was not romantic, but like most royal marriages, used to forge an alliance and consolidate the power the Herodian dynasty. John knew the Herodian dynasty was collaborating with the Roman empire and oppressing the people of Israel, therefore, he was not only opposed to the brazen patriarchal activity of Herod's sons swapping wives. He was also opposed the dynasty itself and would not support its consolidation and expansion. And John didn't just proclaim that Herod's marriage to Herodias was illegal on one occasion. Scripture and history tell us he did so again and again to the point of embarrassment for Herod, which led to John being arrested, thrown into prison, and eventually beheaded.

My grandfather, the Methodist minister, used to say the only stories worth reading are those with sex and violence. I think he liked Matthew 14. It is no surprise this is one of the few stories in the gospels that has been made into an opera. Richard Strauss' *Salome*, named after the daughter of Herodias in the gospel of Mark, and based on an Oscar Wilde play of the same title, brings the drama, tragedy, and horror of this story to life. However, both the play and opera take artistic license by imagining Salome fell in love with John the Baptist, tried to seduce him, and when he did not welcome her advances, she heartbrokenly turned to murder as her only option. Wilde and Strauss believed unrequited love would make it easier for us to understand her murderous activity. Only a woman scorned, these two men imagined, could explain her exceptionally violent behavior. But the reality of the story is far more disturbing and likely more difficult for Wilde, Strauss, or any man to accept.

Herodias and her daughter were trapped in a patriarchal system, and their autonomy was severely limited. Before we judge these women, we must seek to understand them. When you're trapped in an oppressive system one way to survive is to play the role the system wants you to play and use it for your benefit. You may not be free, but if you play your part, you can make power work for you. So Herodias and Salome developed this strategy to use their cunning and seduction to gain power within an unjust system. The execution of John is not the only tragedy in this story. It is also a tragedy that these two women became agents of a violent patriarchal system; deputized to administer the punishment and death the system requires, things that men (like Herod in this story), were too cowardly to do for themselves.



The first thing that comes mind when I read this story is not *Game of Thrones* but *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood—the dystopian novel recently adapted by Hulu. After an attack on the capital that kills the President and most of Congress, a radical political group called the “Sons of Jacob” uses theocratic ideology to launch a fascist revolution. [I don’t know why you’re looking at me like that, this was written in 1985.] The Sons of Jacob quickly consolidate power over, suspend the Constitution, censor the newspapers, and establish a military dictatorship known as Gilead. Then they reorganize society based on a strange interpretation of ideas in the Hebrew Bible and one of the most significant changes is the complete subordination of women. Women become the lowest ranking class of people and are not allowed to own money or property, read, or write, and are deprived of control over their own bodies, forcibly assigned to produce children for the ruling class of men known as “Commanders.”

The central character is a woman named Offred—who like all the other Handmaids—has been humiliatingly renamed as the possession of their Commander—“of Fred.” He real name is June Osborne and she’s one of the few remaining fertile women in all of Gilead. The novel explores themes of women in a patriarchal society, loss of agency and individuality, and the various means by which women resist and try to gain autonomy, self-determination, and liberation. While the depiction of men in *The Handmaids Tale* is not very flattering, the two characters that are most terrifying in my opinion are Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy; women deputized to enforce the brutal oppression of the handmaids.

Aunt Lydia’s role it is to keep Handmaids subservient, which crystallizes one of the novel’s most keen observations: the ways women often harm other women and become complicit in patriarchal structures to hold onto what little power they’ve been afforded. Feminist scholars call this “proximate power,” the power women receive as the daughter, wife, mother, partner, or lover of a man. Aunt Lydia is authorized by the Commanders to preside over the detainment, torture, and murder of Handmaids who don’t behave according to the harsh rules of Gilead. The worst part is that she imagines she’s helping the Handmaids, at one point saying, “You know I do my very best to protect you,” during an execution. Serena Joy is Commander Fred’s wife who is hoping June Osborn, their Handmaid, will provide one for her. Her support of the system is born out of a desire for a child, but it leads her to participate in the most horrific acts of terror against June and the other Handmaids.



Cultural critic Angelica Jade Bastien writes that this story reveals the tragic ways women sometimes collaborate with their own oppression. “The reality” she writes “is that no women in Gilead have real power—only a delusive version [of power] that allows them to keep other women below them.” Bastien claims, “For many, *The Handmaid’s Tale* speaks to our era more than the one into which it was born. Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia aren’t just nightmares housed in dystopias. They aren’t just the conservative blonde celebrity [politicians] sporting empty smiles as they spout noxious beliefs. They have existed throughout American history.”ⁱ

“The characters Atwood invented” Bastien claims “are an amalgam of Phyllis Schlafly and Tammy Faye Bakker with a dash of Aimee Semple McPherson. The spectacle of the female fundamentalist celebrity and a reminder that [patriarchy] could not thrive without the enthusiastic backing of women. That’s what makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* image of female complicity and villainy so blistering. It shows how futile it is. If feminism is only about representation, choice, or vaguely sketched notions of empowerment, it is hard to say our Serena Joys and our Aunt Lydias are not feminists...[however] a form of feminism that celebrates power for power’s sake, instead of interrogating how it is distributed, will usher us into fascism.”ⁱⁱ

Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Herodias and Salome remind us that representation in the halls of power is not enough to change the system. Female faces in “high places” won’t dismantle the patriarchy. It is extremely important for Women to have more power, but we need something much deeper to find justice and liberation and create a world of equity for all people. To do that we will have to interrupt the patriarchy and refuse to participate in the system. This is especially true for men. I recently met a trans masculine friend at a coffee shop and we had a great conversation that led to the question, “What does it mean to be a man?” or better yet, “What is masculinity?” We lamented the fact that traditional masculinity is toxic and broken, bereft of any true beauty, integrity, or responsibility. We agreed we need a new vision of a just, feminist, and intersectional vision of what it means to be masculine. For a straight white man and a trans masculine friend to find common ground because we’re struggling with the same question was healing and lifegiving!



I'm sorry to say we didn't come up with a new vision, but we did remember the words of the late great feminist bell hooks who said patriarchy not only harms women, but deprives men of their full humanity and destroys their well-being, by taking their lives daily; demanding they remain emotional [infants]." She said, "the crisis facing men is not the crisis of masculinity [itself], but the crisis of patriarchal masculinity." We remembered hooks saying, "What the world needs now is liberated men who are 'empathetic and strong, autonomous and connected, responsible to self, to family and friends, to society, and capable of understanding how those responsibilities are, ultimately, inseparable." She said, "We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men both support, even if men receive more rewards from that system. [Therefore], dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together."ⁱⁱⁱ We must do it together!

The problem is that when we look at the patriarchal world today where men like Herod continue to exert their power in authoritarian ways and women like Herodias and Salome continue to prop up the system by doing men's bidding, we can easily become overwhelmed and filled with despair about the enormity and complexity of the obstacles we face. We can look at all the ugliness, violence, and death that patriarchy has wrought in our lives, our family and friends, our society, our churches, let alone our country, and just want to give up or focus on something else. It's too much to bear. We throw our hands up and say, "What are we supposed to do? I'm just one person struggling to find my way in this crazy world. How can I make a difference." I know the feeling. I've been there and said that. But that's because I fell into the trap of believing the death of John was the end of the story. No, I was mistaken. This story doesn't end in death. It begins and ends with Jesus!

This story begins with Herod thinking about Jesus, wondering if he might be John raised from the dead—and his fears would soon be more than realized. This story also ends with Jesus healing people and presiding over a miracle in the desert where 5000 men with women and children are fed from just a few loaves and a few fish. Here in the wilderness Jesus created an alternative banquet of compassion and equality that overshadows Herod's birthday celebration of violence giving birth to a new reality of beloved community. Jesus was suffering from the tragic loss of his friend and mentor at the hands of the powers that be and withdrew to grieve alone, but the crowds were grieving John's death as well. And they came out to join Jesus, and Matthew tells us he was moved with compassion for them.



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Jesus lived in a world that was just as ugly, violent, and deathly as ours, yet he showed us a way forward—what we can do, how we can respond, and in so doing he provided a model of masculinity—feminist masculinity. First, he grieved. Somebody said, “real men don’t cry,” but Jesus on the other hand openly and publicly grieved the death of his friend and mentor. He even took time away from the rush of it all to grieve. He grieved not only John’s death, but the ugliness, violence, and death of first century Judea. And he made no apologies for it either. He just grieved. The second response Jesus had to the violence and death of the world was to shower people with compassion. He healed people, he touched people, he loved people. When the disciples tried to send people away, he told them to feed people—not only the men, but the women and children as well. And because the disciples shared, there was enough for everyone regardless of gender. Jesus hosted a feast where there was “plenty of good room” to “sit at the welcome table,” a banquet where nobody was on the menu—the very banquet of the kingdom of God.

Herod’s birthday is the end of the story, Herodias and Salome’s murderous plot is not the end of the story, John’s execution is not the end of the story, ugliness is not the end of the story, violence is not the end of the story, death is not the end of the story, patriarchy is not the end of the story. Jesus is the beginning and the end of the story; God is the alpha and omega of the story, which means we don’t have to play the role that patriarchy wants us to play! Like June Osborn and the other Handmaids, we can resist! In fact, we are required to resist. We are required not to submit ourselves to systems that kill us or other people. We have the freedom and the power to build a new and better world if we want to—a world of justice and equity for all people—a world where women have autonomy, self-determination, and liberation—a world where men step up to become more than the shallow version of masculinity our society demands—a world where men and women, non-binary and transgender people all live in equality, and work together to overturn the patriarchy.

Being in the room where it happens is not enough to change the world. Being at the table where decisions are made is not enough to keep everyone else off the menu. Representation won’t dismantle the system. But Jesus showed us that radical and consistent expressions of grief and compassion have the power to overturn the patriarchy, build a beloved community, and turn our world upside down into the kingdom of God. To be a feminist is to work for the equality of women, which is a way of embodying the radical and consistent expression of grief and compassion that we see in Jesus—the kind of grief and compassion that has the power to overshadow Herod’s horrific birthday celebration with the birth of a new creation.



And so, I'm wondering if there is anyone in this church today who is willing to grieve the violence of our world? Is there anyone in this church today who is willing to reach out heal the sick? Is there anyone in this church today who is willing to feed the hungry? Is there anyone in this church who is willing to live with compassion? Are there any women willing to refuse to participate in the system, stop playing the role patriarchy wants you to play, and resist the death-dealing ways of Herodias and Salome? Are there any men who are willing to turn away from the toxic power of Herod and practice a holy masculinity—a feminist masculinity? Is there anyone in the church of any gender who is willing to work together overturn the patriarchy and build a better world? Is there anyone willing to follow in the way of the Jesus who turned the world upside down? If so, let all God's people say "Amen."

ⁱ Angelica Jade Bastien, "Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* Are so Terrifying?," *SLATE*, May 19, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Washington Square Press, 2004.