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Author Flannery O’Connor wrote in her book Mystery and Manners:

*There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment.*

Today’s rather gruesome story is one that’s pretty familiar to us. It’s been portrayed in plays, opera, movies and TV miniseries. It’s a story of power, powerlessness, choices made, and, as the O’Connor quote suggests, grace to be accepted or rejected.

Usually, the focus is on the dancing daughter of Herodias, rather than any of the other players in the scene, so I’ll start with her. Virtually all of the portrayals of Herodias’ daughter that I mentioned before show her as seducing Herod with her shocking dance, sometimes called the Dance of the Seven Veils. But the text doesn’t say anything about that. In fact, in the text she’s called a [*korasío*,](http://biblehub.com/greek/korasio__2877.htm) which means little girl. The other place we see this word in Mark is in the reading from the week before last, describing Jairus’ daughter, who is also described as being 12 years old.

Since neither Mark nor Matthew, who are the only ones to tell this story in their Gospels, mention anything about veils or seduction, I think it’s safe to assume that these embellishments are the product of overactive Hollywood imaginations who in turn are taking their cues from the overactive Victorian imaginations of a century before.

Still, that version of the story persists in our minds for some reason. Maybe it’s more exciting than a 12 year old girl being trotted out to show daddy’s company her new tap routine. Or maybe we’re looking for some reason why Herod would make such an obviously bad choice.

So let’s send the little girl, whose name may or may not have been Salome, off to bed with a drink of water and a pat on the head and look at some of the other players in this little drama.

First we have Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, a man of great wealth and influence. This whole passage is sort of a flash back on Herod’s part, regarding John the Baptist. People are speculating about who this Jesus is, and Herod is no different. But Herod has a guilty conscience, as we come to see further on in the passage, and is sure Jesus is John the Baptist, come back from the dead.

Herod has quite a history with John, before having him executed. We get the feeling that Herod admired John, and maybe even liked him. But, powerful as Herod is, there are forces even more powerful than he is at work on him in this story. One of those is his wife, Herodias, the second actor in the scene.

All we know about Herodias is that she was Herod’s sister in law before divorcing her first husband in favor of Herod Antipas, who had also divorced his first wife. We also know from the text that she held a grudge against John the Baptist, although that’s putting it a bit mildly considering what happens later. This is presumably because John in no uncertain terms condemned her marriage to Herod.

Herod is caught between a rock and a hard place with Herodias and John. While he spent time listening to what John had to say and knew him to be a holy and righteous man, he was also greatly influenced by Herodias’ opinion. Maybe he loved her to distraction, which makes sense considering the lengths he went to marry her. Or maybe she was really formidable and he was a little afraid of her. The text leaves that up to our imaginations. Whatever any of their motivations were, this is a very human story of fear, power, influence, and ultimately grace rejected.

John the Baptist also plays a most important role, even though he never actually appears in the scene. Well, he does come on at the end, but that hardly counts because it’s only his head. He works off stage on Herod’s conscience, and his influence on Herod no doubt fuels Herodias’ rage against him. John is never portrayed as someone who minces words, no matter who or how powerful the person is to whom he is speaking, so I imagine this scenario is no different.

John represents the other side of the coin from the choice that Herod ultimately takes – the side of repentance and turning towards God. The side of grace accepted.

Because Herod has a choice at every step he takes. He can choose to act on what he’s hearing John saying to him. He can choose to turn back to the law in his marriage situation, although it’s pretty complicated by that time. He can choose not to imprison John, even though he’s doing it “for John’s own protection” against Herodias. And he can choose not to have John executed. But he makes spectacularly bad decisions at every turn.

Let’s fast forward to Herod’s birthday party. Naturally, as a powerful political leader he wouldn’t have a quiet, understated birthday party with just a few family and friends and a little cake and ice cream. No, any special occasion would be an opportunity to further solidify his power base by inviting all of the Galilean rich and powerful, so that’s who he invited to this shindig. And naturally they would come, for the same reasons. And for cake, of course!

It kind of reminds me of the movie Ghostbusters, where the little accountant character, Louis, has a birthday party but he only invites clients so he can write the whole thing off.

So that’s our cast of characters. In order of most powerful to least powerful, at least on the surface, they are Herod, Herod’s bigwig guests, Herodias, Herodias’ daughter, and finally, bringing up the rear, John the Baptist. You’d think that Herod holds all the cards, but he’s swept around like a paper cup in a storm drain, and makes all of his decisions based on fear and tying to keep up appearances. And those decisions are pretty much universally bad.

But he’s only human, right? Who hasn’t made some bad decisions in their life? Oh sure, they probably haven’t resulted in someone’s head on a platter, but it’s all relative. Sometimes those bad decisions are the result of being too poorly informed to make the right choice. But although those cases might result in an epic fail, it’s the bad choices made with full knowledge of what’s right that cause the real problems.

Everyone is faced with these kinds of choices many times in their lives and this is where the grace that Flannery O’Connor speaks about comes in. In those times, when we are faced with a difficult choice to make, there is always a path that leads to grace. Very often, this path is not the easiest, or doesn’t yield the highest returns. But we know it’s the right path to take because we have to talk ourselves out of it and we have to work hard to justify the path we DO take.

Since Herod was essentially a politician, let’s pick on politicians for a minute. The way our political system is set up, most politicians both on the left and on the right, need money and lots of it. So essentially, they have to choose to sell their power in order to obtain it in the first place. They may justify it by saying that once they’re elected they’ll vote with their conscience, but we all know that’s not usually the case.

Then once they’re in office, deals are continuously being made (sometimes with the devil) in order to keep the influence they’ve established or to make it grow. They might say the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, but mainly they’re pandering to the needs of the VERY few in order to keep their place in the pecking order.

But it’s not just politicians who make bad decisions. They’re just the low hanging fruit. Business people do it all the time. “We need to look out for the shareholders!” they cry, as they’re laying off workers or outsourcing their production or polluting the environment. “Our hands are tied! We have to do this in order to stay in business!”

And on a personal level, we all have plenty of excuses for making bad decisions. “Of course I speed – if I didn’t, I’d be a danger to others.” Or “So I pad my deductions on my tax return – everyone does it!” Or any number of other small choices made for the wrong reasons. And no, I’m not pointing any fingers.

The problem with these bad choices, big or small, is that they lead us away from grace, and away from God. And grace, and God, are what we need more of these days, not less.

But it’s really hard to be like John the Baptist, in his uncompromising righteousness. Or like Paul, in his burning pursuit of the Godly life for himself and all of Jesus’ followers. Or like Jesus, himself, in his perfect, sinless, goodness.

But there is something we CAN do. Stop, look and listen. Stop what we’re doing and think before taking that next step. Look for the presence of God’s grace, and then accept that grace rather than taking the easy road. Listen for that still small voice of God as it speaks to our own conscience, and listen to the opinions of people we really respect, not just admire for their ability to get ahead.

This is not an easy path to take. Making the right decisions probably won’t make us rich or powerful. In fact, more likely just the opposite. As we see from the Gospel, Jesus and John didn’t live long prosperous lives by proclaiming the truth. But I guarantee, that truth, those good decisions, WILL ultimately set us free, and set us on the path to God.

Amen.