

How to Handle a Bully: Jesus v. Herod

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Growing up, every kid has to learn how to stand up to bullies.

My moment came with Jimmy Dawkins in elementary school. A lot of kids got beat up at home—guessing Jimmy Dawkins was one. Somehow, I'd gained his attention and he started taunting me. So I kept my eyes peeled for him, crossing the street to avoid him, taking a different route home sometimes.

One summer day at Trojan field in NW Detroit, playing with my buddy Jimmy Hahn (different Jimmy, lots of Jimmy's). Jimmy Dawkins came by and took Jimmy Hahn's baseball mitt and was taunting us with it. I blew a cork and went after Jimmy Dawkins—screaming at him, tackled him, then lay there as he got me in a head lock and smacked me around pretty good. When it was over, baseball mitt laying on ground and Jimmy Dawkins was gone...and that was end of bullying. I didn't feel humiliated for getting beat up—that was a given. I felt good about standing up to him.

The first thing I admired about Jesus in the gospels: how he stood up to bullies—a ruler named Herod Antipas being chief example.

Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee (northern Israel). Roman governor named Pilate was ruler of S. Israel (Jerusalem) and Herod had a palace there where he came for high holy days. Herod complicated: **ethnically Arab, religiously Jewish, culturally Greek, and politically Roman.** He served at pleasure of Rome, but he was regarded as "King of Jews"—his father built the Temple in Jerusalem.

What made Herod tick is what makes most bullies tick: fear.

Herod Antipas lived in a world of fear. His father was **Herod the Great**—a ruler who killed one of his wives and two of his sons. Qualifies as an abusive home environment.

First story involving Herod Antipas is when he had John Baptist killed in Mark 6.

Probably drunk at time—pleased by daughter's dancing at a banquet with many guests. With great bravado says, **"Ask whatever you will up to half my kingdom and it will be yours."** Daughter confers with her mother who says, **"The head of John the Baptist on a platter."** The girl tells Herod. Unwilling to lose face before his guests, Herod reluctantly issues the order, John Baptist is beheaded.

In this lengthy account of how John the Baptist was killed—nothing about the fear John felt. It's all about the fear that drove Herod: His fear of John (he admired John and feared him); his fear of his guests (he didn't want to lose face by renegeing on his rash vow); and John's murder led Herod to fear that the new miracle worker, Jesus, was John the Baptist back from the dead.

In 2012, I rried to adopt a dog from humane society—a German shepherd. After a week, it started going after guests (leash in house). Hired a dog psychologist who said dog had “fear based aggression” Many bullies have fear-based aggression. Herod Antipas was one.

These bullies make us afraid of them, not just by their aggression, but because their own fear is contagious.

Like most bullies, Herod projected his fear through others. Groups organize around most anxious members. Often bullies are most anxious—so people organize around them. The people around the bully warn other not to cross the bully. (When I was telling my Evangelical pastors—national leaders—that I couldn't enforce party line on LGBTQ, no one warned me directly “If you do this, I'll oppose you.” They all said, “Oh this is not going to end well!” They knew the bully was the system, Evangelicalism...as members of that system they were channeling the fear of the system.

Fear is a contagion. Bullies count on others to spread it.

Political bullies rise to power on the coattails of fear and they often make **unholy alliances** with **religion**. Herod had opponents among the leaders of Israel (Pharisees on the whole opposed him) but he was smart: he knew he couldn't rule without religious support. So **he curried favor of religious elites**, offering favors in exchange for their support. His father rebuilt the temple, so his main religious support came from leaders connected to the Temple. NT refers to religious supporters of Herod as “**Herodians**.”

Hitler gained power by sweet-talking German church leaders. Luther was an anti-Semite, and this had not yet been renounced. **Vladimir Putin** rose to power by sweet-talking Russian Orthodox church leaders. (Last year he made a show in front of Orthodox leaders, a handpicked crowd, and State TV—stripping off his shirt, getting baptized in frigid waters, a ritual many Orthodox do on Epiphany.) While **Nixon** was hacking DNC he was kissing up to **Billy Graham**—when Nixon tapes released, Graham

had to issue a public apology for yucking it up with Nixon while Nixon was spewing his anti-Semitism.

Jesus lived his entire life under threat of Herod the Great and his successor, Herod Antipas.

What can we learn from Jesus about handling bullies?

1. Don't mirror the *fear* that emanates directly from the Bully, or indirectly, through other people.

Lk. 13: 31–33 Jesus was tending to needs of the common people on the margins of Jewish life. Some Pharisees in Galilee would have been tuned into Herod. To preserve Israel from Herod's violent impulses, they needed to contain him—cooperating where they could to gain influence. Today we see good people trying to limit the damage of a bad leader by surrounding the leader.

Of all the leadership groups in Israel, Pharisees most prominent **resisting** the line of Herod. The Pharisees who warned Jesus in Luke 13, were in a delicate balancing act with Herod. They were in **contact** with Herod, in hopes of a **more friendly-to-Israel** Herod. But they we're **channeling** Herod's fear and his threats [albeit for the good of Jesus]. They were mirroring Herod's fear to Jesus.

Jesus would have none of it. **"Go to tell that fox..."** was an insult; everyone in rural Israel either kept chickens or tended grapevines; foxes were sneaky animals who went after chickens & grape-vines—people did not like foxes. His message to Pharisees: *I am not moved by fear of Herod*. He was inviting them to join him in not being moved by fear of Herod either. They couldn't deliver his message to Herod without standing up to him.

Having said that, Jesus did move out of reach of Herod, he just took his time doing it.

2. Don't mirror the *tactics* of the Bully in order to resist him.

Luke 23: 6-12 **"He questioned him at some length"** despite the fact that Jesus was not answering any of Herod's questions.

Herod using a common tactic of bullies: verbal harangue. Using up all the air-time. Spinning his version of reality like a spider's web—but out of words. I picture a long, rambling speech, full of praise of Jesus (Herod was fascinated by John Baptist and Jesus)—like an abusive husband uses praise & threats to control his victim. When the long-winded speech with a question buried somewhere in it was over, Jesus didn't respond with his own long-winded speech with an answer buried in it. He didn't mirror Herod's tactic. He did the opposite: silent.

I imagine Herod tried again, spinning a longer verbal spider web, loaded with less praise and more veiled threats, and a question. Followed by another silence from Jesus. Then the veiled threats gave way to brazen threats and the questions were along the lines of "Don't you know who I am? Don't you know it's dangerous to cross me?" All of it met by silence.

Today we call verbal bullying "gaslighting"—spinning a web of words that constitutes an alternate version of reality, using alternate facts (formerly called "lies"). This tactic puts a **neurological load** on listener: in order to understand what someone is saying the brain first considers that it's true, then your brain has to override it. **"A lie travels half way round the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."** (Mark Twain). It literally takes **extra mental energy** for your brain to listen to verbal bullying and it works by wearing people out.

In this context (face-to-face with Herod), the silence of Jesus was not submission, avoidance or acquiescence (compliance, assent.)

Silence was a powerful form of **resistance**. He did not dignify Herod's verbal bullying with a response. To do so would have been to enter the web Herod was spinning. If you're a fly and you see a spider spinning a web, stay out of the web.

Notice that in the one case, Jesus resisted Herod's threat by speaking out against Herod (*Go tell that fox*). In another case, Jesus resisted by silence. Each response can be affective. What Jesus **did not do** was **"go along to get along."**

3. Fortify yourself with love to drive out the fear of the Bully.

We should assume Jesus spent plenty of time being afraid of Herod. (*Why are we in Egypt, Mom?*) Hero's journey story—hero is often driven into his quest by a bully. In

Lord of Rings, it's the nazgul, ringwraithes, that chase Frodo Baggins out of the comfort of the Shire to go on his quest. Herod played that role in Jesus' life.

Can assume Jesus was terrified of Herod. Question is not, "Was Jesus afraid of Herod?" The question is, "Where did the fear of Herod drive Jesus?" And it drove him to prayer. Drove him to God.

Fear of Herod may be what drove Jesus to experience God's love so intensely. **Perfect Love drives out fear.** When the fear is great, it takes pressing into love to drive it out (the "perfect" in "perfect love drives out fear" means "the fullness of love.")

Jesus most common message: **Don't be afraid!** It was Jesus' connection to God that drove out his fear; fear of Herod was occasion of his need. The great lovers (King, Ghandi, Sojourner Truth) driven by fear into arms of divine LOVE, perfect love, fullness of love.

We all have our personal fears-anxieties. We may have personal bullies to deal with in our families, workplace, neighborhoods. But we also have a national mood of fear. I'm a white man, born citizen, property owner so my rights have been secured since the beginning. If I were a black man, my right to vote was not secured until voting rights Act of 1964. Now that's being undermined. If I were a gay man, right to marry is 3 years old, that's under threat. If I were an immigrant, a Muslim, you better believe I'd be checking the rear-view mirror frequently.

We have a job to do: give ourselves to love—to look out for each other with love, to practice love, because love is the power that drives out fear. This is what the Spirit of Jesus is doing among us. Let's do everything in our power to cooperate.

QUIET REFLECTION

Call to mind a room or a favorite outdoor place that's easy for you to imagine as a place that is filled with love (Yosemite Valley).

Focus on that space as a space filled with love. As you breathe in, you're breathing in air that is full of love, like O², as you breathe out, you're releasing the fear you came in with.

God of love, fill me with love today.