

Out of This World
John 6:1-21
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“It’s easier to fly a rocket into space than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.’ So reads a recent tweet from Middle Collegiate Church, one of our sibling congregations in New York City. They went on to attribute this quote to “Jesus, probably.”

It’s often difficult to traverse the distance between our context and Christ’s. The route by which we meet our contemporary challenges with ancient Biblical wisdom can be a circuitous one. But there’s something rather jarring about the speed with which Christ’s condemnations of the rich collide with our billionaire-laden society.

In a world where personal choices about private capital insulate us from collective responsibility, we consider it ethically neutral—if not laudable—that our 21st century “space race” is just a contest among a handful of the world’s richest men.

In our world, friends, individual pursuit comes at the expense of the common good. Corporate profits and stock market summaries are the measures of economic health while poverty barely registers as a political issue of concern. Expansion, increase, and growth are the only acceptable behaviors for markets while the planetary and human impacts of climate change are relegated as “externalities” rather than *the* primary ethical consideration of this moment.

These are the stories we tell ourselves. These are the habits that build the very world we inhabit in turn, a world in which we count everything *except* the cost.

How far the stories we tell ourselves have strayed from the word and witness of the poor prophet we worship. How isolating are the habits we’ve embraced. *Us*—a people animated by a boundary-breaking Spirit who only ever shows up *in* and *for the sake of* community. How great a distance we’ve managed to create between our economic interests and the justice scripture tells us is at the heart of divine concern.

Middle Church’s tweet made me chuckle, yes, but a second read made me wince. Because it’s not just a condemnation of the rich, or even of the systems that have created them; it is also a *convicting* reflection of the church’s anemic witness. Of just how little of our power we’ve leveraged for the sake of those whose exploitation is fueling this hubristic display.

And, hey, listen: I’ve canceled my Amazon Prime account, but I sometimes use my cousin’s log in for Prime-exclusive video content. And while I try to resist doing so, I just purchased something from Amazon I couldn’t find elsewhere. (And to be completely honest, folks, I didn’t even look *that* hard.)

So I’m not trying to weigh us down with guilt about the choices we’ve made within a broken system. But I am trying to get us to excavate the stories that have formed us. To examine the

habits that have shaped our behaviors (*I'm looking at you, "Buy now with 1-Click" button!*). And to explore anew the **words** that have called our **world** into being.

And I want us to consider what alternative narratives the church might offer as we seek to repair a society fractured under the weight of greed.

In recent weeks I've preached about our faith as a movement rooted in resurrection power—one that conspires with the dogged persistence of life against *whatever* is death-dealing.

Which is why our vision of a just economy rejects habits, customs, and ethics formed by notions of scarcity and instead builds our life together on stories of divine abundance. Stories that help us rest in the surety of God's provision. Stories like that in today's reading from John's Gospel.

Scholars are quick to note that this crowd-feeding narrative is the only miracle to make an appearance in all four gospel accounts—and there are even a couple of smaller crowd-feeding stories as well, bringing the total number of such tales up to six. So I think it's safe to assume that versions of this particular story must have spread widely among the earliest Christians. Something about *this* miracle in particular captured their imagination.

Given their ubiquity, I wonder if it would be too strong a claim to say that these stories were second only to the resurrection in their power of identity-formation for the early church.

You see, on the margins of Empire, under the threatening shadow of the cross that killed their savior (*for a time*), these earliest Jesus-followers depended on rituals of song and story to bind them together. Long before creeds and tests of orthodoxy, long before the Biblical canon was established (much less widely distributed), *their* faith was defined by habits and customs.

Early Christianity was less an ascent to belief than a practice of belonging. It was participation in a radical community whose stories were in diametric opposition to those that served the interests of Roman power.

Indeed, "*the church*" was more of a collection of scattered communities who shared these stories of resistance. One could argue that their orientation against Empire made this "the" church's most defining feature across wide regional and cultural differences.

And it's telling that Jesus' earliest followers considered radical *economic* practices to be the most faithful embodiment of his teachings. They understood that *in practice* resurrection power had something to say about their distribution of material goods.

That at the root of the Kingdom Christ proclaimed was this miracle of a very large crowd fed by a very modest meal. The kinds of meals around which these early followers of Jesus would gather in one another's homes. Bread blessed, broken, and shared.

To side with the persistence of life, early Christians knew they would have to interrupt injustice and build communities rooted in divine provision instead.

Because a resurrection people are those who pursue life with faith in God's abundance.

Such communities of resistance rely on the miracle at the heart of this story—and look Christ’s reason for coming as the church’s reason for being.

In Luke 4 Jesus says he came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim healing, liberation, and hope for those suffering under oppression, and to set off a radical redistribution of resources.

Just four chapters away from today’s gospel passage, Jesus affirms that in the face of systems of theft, death, and destruction, he came so that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Life. Abundance.

If the story of the resurrection affirmed for the early church that God sides with life over death, the miracle of these crowd-feeding narratives affirmed the divine intention of life lived in abundance.

And that’s more than a catchphrase. It’s an open act of defiance against the powers of this world.

For while Empire conquers, exploits, and stratifies societies, the Kingdom Christ preached liberates, empowers, and ensures just societies.

One is rooted in death-dealing systems that consider the wants of the few over the needs of the many. It embraces competition over scarce resources.

The other is rooted in systems of mutual belonging that seek life and wholeness **for all** out of a faith in divine provision. It embraces cooperation in God’s abundance.

Equipped with stories of life and narratives of abundance, the early church forms citizens that are certainly *in* but decidedly *not* of the Empire of its day.

And if we glance over at Acts 2, we can see the shape of these communities formed by this shared commitment to life in abundance. Our earliest Christian ancestors are described as having “all things in common.” They were a people who would willingly “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

In these two verses alone, we see a radically different community than the one formed by the Empire’s imagination.

But how different is the American church today than the Empire we inhabit? Would an account of our congregation strike readers as a dramatic departure from—and resistance to—the narratives of our American empire?

We have the same teachings and stories as the early church, and as Middle’s tweet demonstrates, our society boasts many of the same challenges too. Massive wealth inequality. Exploitation of the poor. Lack of access to healthcare and social stigma imposed on the elderly, sick, and disabled—those rendered expendable by our cult of productivity and profitability.

As the gospel of John tells us, Christ, the Word made flesh, broke into this narrative to disrupt it. He interrupted the death-dealing stories of his day with a life-giving alternative. And as the Book of Acts tells us, Christ's earliest followers lived into the divine possibility that Jesus imagined and the Spirit empowered into being.

But do our habits demonstrate our deep faith in resurrection power and divine abundance?

As I look around, I do see many, many signs of hope.

I am seeing more churches create mutual aid networks and land trusts. I'm seeing congregations on the brink of closing considering equity in the stewardship of their resources beyond the life of the church. I'm seeing congregations buy up and forgive medical debt—declaring Jubilee for those who need it most! I see congregations joining with the Poor People's Campaign to bring poverty to the forefront of our nation's political agenda. Mark your calendars for their moral march on Washington, D.C., next summer: June 18, 2022.

I'm seeing churches build up and advocate for more affordable housing in our community. I'm seeing them stand with mobile home residents whose concerns are being ignored even while their rent is being raised. One of our ministry partners, Orange County Justice United, has been doing just such work. This organizing collective of faith communities is even now listening to the stories of this church and our neighbors to discern where God might be calling us to act and interrupt injustice next.

Soon I will be sharing more opportunities for our congregation to partner with Justice United. For we too must discern how the Spirit is leading us to inhabit these stories anew—to embrace their resurrection power once again.

And this fall the Board of Adult Education is planning to revisit our congregational covenants. They are the best reflection of the stories that animate this community. For those who may not know, we have an Economic Justice Covenant that says we will provide service and care to those in need, educate ourselves on the root causes of poverty, seek long-term ways to empower those rendered powerless, stand against the injustice that perpetuates need, strive for economic justice within the church and beyond, steward the earth, and join with others advocating against poverty.

Our covenant begins by saying "God blesses the world with abundance" and goes on to say that this church will "strive to answer Jesus' call to work for a world where both mercy and justice prevail, all are share" in that divine abundance.

I wonder what new headlines will be written as we reclaim this covenant, this story of divine abundance. As we interrupt the economic injustices of this world for the sake of life. As we begin to inhabit another world altogether.

Sure, it'll be out of this world, but we won't need a rocket ship to get us there.

Amen.