

Our Holy Habits: Revolutionary Justice

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[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. Dear Lord, as we come into this place, as we spend this hour together singing and praying and celebrating, moving in and moving on, may we remember the beauty of harvest, the ways in which you are showing up as enough among us, in our individual lives, in our families, in our community groups, in our workplaces, the ways that seeds that we planted with shaky hands we can see sprouting, and that some of those we can see in full fruit.

Lord, please give us hearts attentive to the harvest in our lives right now, attentive to the places of peace. Thank you so much. Please fill us in this moment. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Dear Lexi, breathe deep. Breathe deep, baby girl. We won.

Now life, though not exactly easier, is life all the time. So begins the letter of encouragement that scholar Alexis Gooms writes from her future self to her current self in her short story, Evidence. The story appeared in a 2015 collection called Octavia's Brood in honor of science fiction writer Octavia Butler.

[2 : 1 0] The point of the collection was to encourage social justice activists to write down the visions of the world for which they longed.

To write down the years of the world for which they longed to write down the visions of the world for which they longed to be. To write down what they knew in their bones was possible. But when they discussed it out loud, so often felt like science fiction.

So each writer in the collection wrote a story about the future. They built the world that they wanted to see. At least they built it on paper.

And in so doing, they mapped out the contours of what collective liberation might look like. Starting from a place of liberated imagination, which I would argue is almost always the starting point.

Gooms wrote these words and more. Dear Lexi, breathe deep, baby girl, we one.

[3 : 1 7] Now life, though not exactly easier is life all the town. Not chopped down into billable minutes. Not narrowed into excuses to hurt and forget each other.

I am writing you from the future to remind you to act on your belief. to live your life as a tribute to our victory and not as a stifling reaction to the past.

I am here with so many people you love and their children, and we are eating together, and we are tired from full days of working and loving, but never too tired to remember where we come from.

Everybody eats. Everybody knows how to grow agriculturally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually.

We are more patient than we've ever been. We walk. We drink tea. We are still when we need to be. No one is impatient with anyone else's stillness.

[4 : 3 4] No one feels guilty. For sitting still. Everyone is always learning how to grow. Now, as you might guess, as I first read, when I first read this depiction by Gooms of the Future, it stirred thoughts in me of the kingdom of God, the commonwealth of peace and joy and flourishing made possible, inaugurated by the life of Jesus.

It reminded me of the faith-based world building that is endemic to the Hebrew scriptures, which imagine a future in which the lion lays down with the lamb and swords become tools for making food and we study war no more.

Reading Gooms made me want to jot down all of the ideas that I have about what Shalom realized might look like, liberation and flourishing and wholeness, what it might actually look and taste and smell and sound and feel like.

It made me want to take that list and put it up on the wall above my desk and in my home office to remind me of my North Star.

But I did not create that list. As in so many other moments, I was overwhelmed by the incredible gap between that world and this one.

[6 : 19] overwhelmed by the work and the seeming impossibility. If you're wondering where this is going, welcome to the second sermon in our series, Our Holy Habits.

We've been talking for the last few weeks and we'll be talking for the next few weeks about what it means to hold to community values that bind us in a consensual kinship.

We're talking about these values that we hope become habits of life, embodied rhythms of coming together, rhythms that can help us grow toward the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus both individually and collectively.

Two weeks ago, we focused on the value of radical friendship. I had never preached on friendship, so if you missed that, I hope you'll go back and check that out.

We talked about the book of Ruth and I suggested that the good news for us in this community is that there are people like Naomi who are desperate because of life, because of God or a sense of God, lack of sense of God, sitting right beside people who fill themselves like Ruth to be deeply in touch and refreshed by God.

[7 : 48] The good news is we're sitting right beside each other. Pastor Anthony and I also recorded a podcast. I am not technologically savvy, so Pastor Anthony did all the legwork for that where we talked about radical friendship, so I hope you'll also check that out.

So this evening, what I want to do is just take the time we have left to talk about our second holy habit as a church, which is revolutionary justice. And as I've said, when I think about the results of revolutionary justice, a more liberated and just world, or I read a description of the future like that of Gooms, I feel invigorated, probably like many of us in this room.

I'm excited. But when I think about the practice, the work it takes to get to the North Star, I can quickly become completely overwhelmed.

And it's also been like that in a lot of ways with this sermon. This has probably been one of the hardest sermons that I've, you know, a sermon I've struggled with, and the hardest I've written in a long time.

The scriptures are filled with these amazing exhortations and stories and laws and images that enjoin us, that call us and invite us toward revolutionary justice.

[9 : 11] I started making like a short list because I get excited. I want to talk about power and all these different things. And then I realized the list wasn't all that short. So I'm not going to name them all.

But the scripture is filled with these verses. And then in addition to like struggling with where to start with this sermon, I also found myself like wanting to make sure there were some big ideas that were part of our community's vocabulary.

words like reversal came to mind and reparations and redistribution and disruption and divestment and decolonization.

Words like abolition and activism and organizing and power and prophetic imagination. I had a sense of the scriptures and I had a sense of the community's vocabulary.

There's the vocabulary I hope we can develop together. And it also just felt challenging to figure out what pathway to choose. In the end, I felt this need for us today to begin smaller with some practical ideas, ideas that start right here with what it means to be church in this place.

[10 : 39] So I'm going to go to maybe a portion of scripture that doesn't come to mind when we talk about revolutionary justice. We're going to go to 1 Corinthians 11. I'm going to read some of that.

And I'm going to read some of 12. If you have a Bible and you want to open it, you can at 1 Corinthians 11, verse 17. You're also welcome to read it on the screen as I read it aloud.

1 Corinthians 11, verse 17. Now, in the following instructions, I do not commend you.

Because when you come together, it is not for better, but for the worse. For to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.

And to some extent, I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it be, so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper.

[11 : 51] For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk. What? Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?

Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter, I do not commend you.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body that is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, he took the cup also after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. And then a little further down in chapter 12, Paul addresses another situation.

[12:57] Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. And there are varieties of services, but the same Lord.

And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.

To one is given through the spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another, the utterance of knowledge according to the same spirit. To another, faith by the same spirit. To another, gifts of healing by the one spirit.

To another, the working of miracles. To another, prophecy. To another, the discernment of spirits. To another, various kinds of tongues. To another, the interpretation of tongues.

All of these are activated by one and the same spirit who allots to each one individually just as the spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ.

[14:03] For in one spirit, we were all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slave or free. And we were all made to drink of one spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many.

If the foot were to say, because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? The whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members and the body, each one of them as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And those members of the body that we think less honorable, we clothe with greater honor. And our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.

[15:17] Whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior members, that there may not be dissension within the body.

But the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Okay. That was a chunk of reading. There's plenty to chew on today and throughout the week. But what's happening here in what we've read is that the Apostle Paul is responding in letter form to two situations that are arising in this one specific church, the church Paul himself founded in the city of Corinth, the Greco-Roman city of Corinth.

In the first situation, Paul has these strong words for the way the gathered churches are engaging in the feast of remembrance to Jesus. It seems that sometimes these various house churches get together, all of them in one place, and they partake of what we now consider communion, except that at the time of their gathering, there's a mill, a full mill in addition to the bread and the wine.

And Paul begins by saying, now in the following instructions, I do not commend you. He's about to rebuke them, y'all. He's about to rebuke them. Now, when I was growing up, I definitely heard a rebuke in this passage, but it was very different than what I now think of as the intended meaning of this passage.

[17:00] I, often the pastors I was growing up with, they would frame this rebuke with this accent on the need to examine yourself before communion and not to drink unworthily.

Like, I cannot tell you how many times that word, unworthily, if that particular accent was said. And the implied reason for the need for such thorough examination had to do with, like, personal sins, like dishonesty and hatred and sex before marriage and, you know, being backslidden, which is a word I haven't heard in about 10 years.

But, and I always left those sermons filled with this fear about whether or not I was worthy of taking Holy Communion.

And yet, what Paul condemns here, I now know, is not actually so much about these personal sins. It is much more about what it means to be an alternative community in the heart of a system of domination.

In the church that Paul addresses, there were severe, there was severe social and economic stratification. There were slaves in the church and there were free people as well.

[18:12] There were men and there were women. And in fact, it seems that the church in Corinth mirrored the outside world in this kind of pyramid structure where you have a few well-off people at the top and everybody else is more working class.

Folks who are struggling with poverty. Paul says that when it's time for these people to gather all together, the people with privilege partake without regard for those of less privilege.

Now this makes sense. The people who have the privilege, maybe they don't need to work or their jobs are super flexible. So they're able to come early to the gatherings where the people who work the kinds of jobs that are not flexible arrive late.

And instead of waiting, the folks with privilege, instead of waiting in solidarity, the folks with privilege, they go ahead and they start eating. And not only that, they eat to excess and they drink to excess without regard and right in front of the people who are experiencing deep hunger as daily reality.

They humiliate. That's the word that Paul uses here. They humiliate the majority, the folks that Jesus would call the least. And then in the next chapter, Paul addresses a very different problem.

[19:37] It seems that the Corinthians are quite concerned with spiritual gifts and Paul specifically writes to them to correct the view that speaking in tongues is the greatest gift.

He assures them that there are a variety of gifts, yet all come from God. That the church, like a human body, has many parts and yet is still unified or must be unified.

Now, you may be wondering what these two pieces of advice from Paul to this church have to do with this holy habit of revolutionary justice.

Well, here we go. Let me say some things about that. For starters, it is clear from these two pieces of advice and from the letter as a whole that Paul sees the church as an alternative community or as he later calls the church a colony of heaven.

A colony of heaven. The alternative community of the church exists within a larger system of domination and at that time that system of domination was Rome, the Roman Empire.

[20:48] Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominique Cross and they basically say that, and this is hard to think about but it's true, that domination systems have been the most prevalent form of human government for all of human history.

They are normal rather than abnormal. They're a way of organizing power from the top and they usually consist of three basic things, political oppression and economic exploitation and religious justification.

And Paul basically says that the church is to be this alternative to all of that. The alternative which is always beloved community.

And Paul has the boldness to say that the church should be this watershed of beloved community. When I think about this value of revolutionary justice, I wonder how we can become that kind of community.

an alternative community in which the way of life that we walk outside our walls is already thoroughly and deeply being practiced inside our walls.

[22:04] A church in which we have departed from plantation culture and plantation religion into structural salvation and the liberation that we are called to.

a church in which we openly grapple with the fact that more than 65% of households in this church based on responses from our December survey have an income of more than \$100,000 and over half of that number of that group have an income over \$150,000.

How do we talk about that openly? What does that mean for how we show up as beloved community to one another and in the city?

How can we show up as beloved community as those who are in many ways on the right side of what I've heard called the barbed wire of the world?

When so many of us have the advantages at least of social class, if not of economic class? Well, Paul's advice lets me know a little bit about the foundations necessary in order to become an alternative community genuinely grounded in revolutionary justice.

[23 : 25] So first, Paul insists on subversive memory. After Paul rebukes the privileged folks in the community for gathering in a way that humiliates the people with less privilege, he invites them to remember the words of Jesus on the night that he was betrayed.

Instead of their self-serving way of thinking about communion as a private mill, he calls them to remember this subversive, self-giving way of Jesus. He calls them to cultivate subversive memory. so how do we talk to one another and proclaim from this stage the stories that keep us in pursuit of revolutionary justice? I mean, I can stand up here all day and talk about people like Harriet Tubman that inspire me or Bayard Rustin or Marsha Johnson, these people that every day keep me going, but we all have to talk to one another about what keeps us in pursuit, the stories and the memories that keep us in pursuit of revolutionary justice.

How do we center those stories as a part of our communal narrative? Because my sense is that unless we do that work of subversive memory, then our efforts will be short-sighted.

we've all seen short-sighted work done in the name of justice. And I also sense that it'll be short-lived. Second, Paul insists that the people and the gifts that the domination system views as most marginal are in fact the people and the gifts that must be centered.

[25 : 05] The weaker are in fact the indispensable. Those considered the least honorable are to be treated with the greatest disrespect. Paul brilliantly draws on this metaphor that was commonly used by the upper classes to say that the upper classes were the most important part of this body politic of society.

But he subverts, he takes that metaphor and he subverts it by saying no. It's the folks that seem that are perceived to be the weakest that are the most important. Here, in this community, we often talk about centering the margins but, and I'm a witness to that, that is so much easier to talk about than it is to do.

It takes prioritizing the perspective of the most marginalized over the perspective of the most privileged. And I know, I know that that is a controversial thing to say.

It takes following the lead of the most marginalized over that of the most privileged. And maybe the thing that we least talk about is that it means taking the theological perspectives of folks at the bottom of society seriously.

Even when they don't conform to our sanitized and rational and well-categorized forms of religion. It means letting go of our theological elitism.

[26 : 47] It means paying attention to why marginalized folks tend to have more robust theologies of, say, the demonic as well as more robust theologies of things like miracles.

how do we embody solidarity in our theologies and in our lives with those who live with their backs against the wall?

To borrow the phrase and framework of Howard Thurman. Finally, finally, not only does Paul insist on subversive memory and insists that the most marginalized must be centered, he also insists that a variety of gifts is necessary to do this work.

I love this part of this passage. I might be going out on a limb here, but I assume that what Paul is getting at is that those in an alternative community of revolutionary justice must know who they are. Part of your work is to know, part of our work is to know what gifts we bring. Some of us are positioned to donate to mutual aid within this community and outside of it.

[28 : 01] Some of us are social justice educators. Some of us are gifted organizers. Some of us can be on the front lines of protesting. Some of us need to push back when this church itself goes astray.

Some of us are gifted to be administrators, both within coordinating efforts. Some of us can cook. Hallelujah. Some of us can cook. Okay? We need that too for the movement.

Okay? My point in saying all of that is we have to know who we are and who we are individually and as a community. The work of revolutionary justice is it will be, it will, the work of revolutionary justice

has to start here.

It has to start with what we do with one another. It will begin with us becoming solidly alternative and it will begin with us leaning into subversive memory, with us centering the margins and with us discerning how we are gifted individually and collectively to advance beloved community through revolutionary justice.

Sometimes for me this all does seem impossible. I am not particularly, like I just want to read a book y'all, I just want to read a book, alright? I'm not particularly gifted to be on the front lines of this work.

[29 : 32] Sometimes it does seem too big and it seems like there are too many pathways.

Sometimes when we talk about revolutionary justice and the kind of world that we are building as a church, it to me really does feel like science fiction.

yet I know that the possibility of me as a black, queer, gender non-conforming woman preaching right here, right in front of you felt for most of human history like a complete exaggerated impossibility.

me. Yeah. But what's amazing about that is that somebody still prayed for it and somebody still pushed for it and somebody just kept putting one foot in front of the other in the faintest hope that it might happen one day.

the incredible news, as Paul tells us, is that it all starts with a body given. And the first body given was the body of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we lean into that body given, we become the kind of people who are able to give our bodies to and not, not because we are called to some kind of unhealthy sacrifice of ourselves, but because we are invited to be energized by the very life of God through self-giving.

[31 : 15] Always carrying the truth of resurrection in our bones and in our hearts. Always trusting in the power of new creation. And always trusting that this crazy fiction that we long for is more real than we can ever, ever, ever imagine.

Amen. . . s

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