

REIMAGINE THE WORLD

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Readings: Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

A couple months ago, right about when Kris asked me to preach today, I heard an interview on one of the podcasts I listen to: *Offline with Jon Favreau*. A day or two later, the same guest appeared on *The Ezra Klein Show*.

The interviews were with Helen Lewis, who wrote an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “The Men Who Want Women to Be Quiet.” The lede below the title is “A virulent form of misogyny has become the single most important force holding together the American right.”

Both conversations were fascinating, as was the article she wrote. She interviewed many of the biggest figures in the so-called “manosphere” and really tried to understand their thinking. And she purposely uses a rather neutral word to describe the philosophy—masculinism.

Masculinism is a response to feminism, and Lewis notes that there are defensible and alarming expressions of it. She says: “At one end of the spectrum are legitimate concerns about male loneliness, the declining share of men in higher education, and stagnant wages for non-college-educated men. At the other end of masculinism are a misogynist vocabulary and a political agenda whereby women are denied the right to work, vote, and control their own bodies.”

Many of the scariest versions of masculinism come from Christians. The pastor who leads Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s denomination thinks that men should decide who to vote for on behalf of the women and children in the family.

The pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas says this about what he wants in a president: “I don’t want some meek or mild leader or someone who’s going to turn the other cheek. I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find.” So much for the teachings of Jesus.

Of course, there are a lot of perspectives on gender in the Bible, some of which most of us would find abhorrent. The Genesis reading was in the lectionary for today, and it reflects an ancient perspective of women as property. Jacob worked seven years in order to purchase Rachel, but he got Leah instead. Don’t you hate it when they give you the wrong order in the drive thru?

The women’s father, Laban, doesn’t see it as a big deal—you worked seven years for “this one,” and you can work another seven for “the other one.”

Then we have these parables of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like treasure in a field, like a merchant, like a net. The “kingdom of heaven” is Jesus’ perspective of what it means for God to be in charge.

One thing I see in these Matthew 13 parables is how disruptive the kingdom of heaven can be to what might be called an “orderly society”—at least from the perspective of those with power.

The kingdom of heaven is like mustard. Ancient writers caution against cultivating mustard because it grows like a weed, quickly taking over the whole field. I’m sure neighboring landowners weren’t happy about that guy.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that someone goes to questionable ethical lengths to acquire. The treasure was probably buried by a wealthy person; it was a common practice in the ancient world before banks and the FDIC. There were rules for what you’re supposed to do if you find a treasure that’s not yours,

but this guy moved the treasure to a different part of the field, then bought the field.

The kingdom of heaven like a pearl that's so valuable that someone employs a high risk/high reward strategy to get their hands on it.

And then there's the parable of the leaven. This story is not about an average woman baking normal bread.

Rather, the mention of yeast would have caught the audience's attention, because yeast held a stigma in the first century as a symbol of decay. Later in Matthew, Jesus warns his disciples against the "yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

The most common bread in first-century Palestine was similar to pita bread. So this woman is doing something unusual. She takes three measures of flour—about 50 pounds!—and sneaks a little leaven in it. The Greek indicates that she's hiding the yeast in the flour.

With 50 pounds of flour, she must be putting on a big party. She wants the bread to be good—social norms notwithstanding. She may not have asked her husband's permission to do this in a world where women were still property. Her guests might be a little mortified when they see the bread—until they taste it.

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. Someone who is marginalized feeling empowered to do something subversive and joyful.

My sermon title comes from Bernard Brandon Scott's book about the parables, *Reimagine the World*. Those of you who were at Southminster before COVID may remember the Jesus Seminar events we held every October, and Brandon Scott participated several times.

He is a down-to-earth guy, but he felt strongly that Jesus' parables were a call to disrupt the status quo—not embrace it. To focus on the needs of all human beings rather than just those who have power. He invited everyone to use the parables to reimagine the world.

And I would say in today's world we need to reimagine Christianity. Millions of people today feel stressed, distressed, and hopeless. Today's young adults, sometimes called Gen Z, are especially stressed—economically, socially, psychologically.

Loneliness IS a big problem in that cohort. Studies show that Gen Z is having far less sex as young adults than any previous generation going back to at least the Boomers. Whatever you think of that, it's a symptom of a general lack of social interaction.

What's more, the way social media algorithms divide us all into little cliques has resulted in a huge gender gap among young adults in terms of political leanings.

That's causing problems for young people who want to have a straight relationship, because many young women frankly would rather stay single—or date other women—than date a masculinist man. So loneliness begets loneliness.

Jesus is an inconvenient figure for a lot of the most prominent masculinists, because he is NOT militant, he's NOT a warrior, and his masculinity comes from his compassion, NOT his dominance.

Historians say that one of the main reasons that Christianity became the dominant religion of Western civilization was its reputation for compassion. Early Christians embraced people who were shunned by society, took in widows and

orphans, and cared for the poor. But once Christianity *became* the dominant religion, a lot of that got pushed to the side.

Wouldn't it be great if we had the reputation for liberating people and empowering them to do joyful and disruptive things. Amen.