

One of our many astute members sent me a painfully accurate cartoon this week.

A man reading the Bible with his son says, "Jesus died on the cross so that we could go to heaven and rich people never have to feel guilty about anything."

This pinpoints a perverse and all too common bastardization of God's good news, not only in its text, but also in its coloring.

The two figures are white, so they figure to have a much better chance of being rich and therefore threatened by the real Jesus story.

Racial economic inequality is worsening in our country according to a troubling study released by the Pew Research Center this week.

The median wealth gap between whites and blacks has widened to 20 to 1, from 12 to 1 in recent years, and it's 18 to 1 between whites and Hispanics.

In the current economic downturn, the median net worth for Hispanic households plummeted 66%, and for black and Asian households more than 50%, compared to a 16% drop for white households.

Presumably Jesus, who is not white, is among the hardest hit.

Surely these statistics must remind him of the days recorded in Matthew 14.

Jesus and his disciples lived in a time when most of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few people and most people, struggling to scrape by, were indebted and beholden to the wealthy few, whose patronage always came with strings attached.

New Testament scholar Ray Pickett explains this in fuller detail in an [article](#) from the current issue of The Lutheran, a copy of which is inserted in your bulletin.

Read it: not right now, but soon.

It profiles an economic landscape we understand more and more ourselves, and it is that polarized economic reality which is the context for the two stories that begin Matthew 14.

Today's gospel is the second story, and we can only understand it in the shadow of the first.

Like today's gospel, the first story is also about a meal, and the contrast is striking.

King Herod gives a birthday banquet.

The menu is lavish and extensive.

The guest list is small, hand selected, by invitation only.

The venue is a palace.

The entertainment is not a preaching rabbi but a dancing daughter, who asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

The prophet was divided, head from body, and a man who had lived on locusts and honey was presented as the main course.

All the guests left feeling empty.

Herod was able to serve this platter of prophet's head because, in Matthew's words,

Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison....

Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Notice that contrast too: Jesus, tired and stung by the news of John's death, welcomes the crowd which Herod fears.

This is more than a tale of two suppers; this is a political showdown between a nervous king and the kingdom of God.

What Jesus does in the deserted place is more than a miracle; it is an act of creative resistance and active refusal to let Herod's status quo way of doing business prevail.

Jesus is presenting a radical alternative to the politics of fear and intimidation: he is promoting a platform of compassion, providence, restoration and wide welcome.

His disciples are worried that there won't be enough; they have been bullied by Herod and his ilk into assuming scarcity instead of abundance, into focusing on what they don't have rather than what they do.

We have nothing here, they begin.

We the church, who follow in their worried footsteps, have been lamenting what we don't have and undervaluing what we do ever since.

What good do our offerings to Lakeview Pantry and The Night Ministry really do?

We can't eliminate hunger or homelessness with them, so haven't we failed?

We continue the disciples' dreary tradition of looking first at need, then at resources, and then doing the math of despair; God must be lying because numbers never do.

Jesus has to lead them and us into a new way of being, and a new way of seeing.

What pittance Jesus does have, he lifts toward heaven and says thank you.

Then, he breaks it and gives it away.

He is trying to teach us how to live.

Whatever we do have is a gift from God; give thanks for it and then give it away.

This is so radically and ridiculously different that it makes Herod delusional with fear.

He thinks Jesus is John come back from the dead, which we all know is as impossible as feeding thousands with a handful of groceries.

Herod fears the crowd because he can do the math of despair: if this many people show up at his palace door demanding attention and food and fairness, he'll be the one losing his head.

Better to divide and conquer than to permit the crowds to be united; better to have them fending for themselves as the disciples have been conditioned to assume rather than to find their strength in sharing, serving and looking out for one another.

Better to strike first and lop off the head of the threat, whether that is John or Jesus.

And so, to insure the reign of division rather than the revolution of multiplication, John is beheaded and Jesus is crucified and the powers that be promote deferred benefits in heaven and a shallow forgiveness for guilty rich people like me, subtracting out the very essence from a gospel of multiplied life for the suffering masses.

Today we trace the deathly cross of Jesus on the forehead of Kaylee Jo Hassman.

It would be easy for us to subtract again, to reduce the gospel, to mistake this as merely the sacred stamp of spiritual ID that is going to someday get this privileged white girl into heaven.

It is far deeper and more dangerous than that.

We are steering Kaylee Jo into a way of life that will get her in trouble with the powers that be.

We are aligning her with Jesus, who unapologetically promotes a disruptive and counter-cultural agenda:

welcome, not fear;

inclusion, not exclusion;
healing for all, not health insurance for some;
trust, not worry;
concern for others before self;
community, not control;
interdependence, not individualism;
sharing, not hoarding,
dividing resources, not people,
gratitude instead of grasping,
giving away life instead of dispensing death.

It is the agenda that got Jesus killed, his body broken on a cross, like bread in a deserted place and at this altar.

It is the agenda that alternately haunts and mobilizes us as his both faithful and fearful followers. This agenda now casts its shadow over Kaylee's future, and we celebrate, because behind the shadow shines a triumphant light.

The cross of Jesus, like the death of John, is only the first of two contrasting, connected stories.

In the second story, disciples come to Jesus' tomb and learn the astonishing good news:

We have nothing here...

Herod was right all along to be afraid.

His way of life leading to death keeps losing to Jesus' way of death leading to life.

May God keep blessing and breaking Kaylee, and all of us, until we trust it enough to die to fear, self-protection and the lies of the system and to live for the nourishment of our neighbor.