

Does He Work?

Rev. Helms Jarrell, QC Family Tree
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*“Rhaji, the Servant.” Saints Art Project,
by Rev. Helms Jarrell.*

On a fairly regular basis, folks will ask to meet with me so that we can share with them about the ministry of QC Family Tree. I’ll invite them over and give them a tour or meet them for coffee at the local hang out. I’ll tell them about our ministry of hospitality and solidarity. I’ll describe an ordinary day and explain our programs. If the signs point to genuine interest, the conversation dives a little deeper. I’ll answer all their questions:

“Do you ever feel scared? What’s it like for your children to live there? Do you feel safe?”

I know that the questioner doesn’t mean to project his/her own fears on me and my neighborhood. I’ll have to admit, though, that this line of safety questioning is a bit agitating. I remain calm, smile, and begin to give story after story of wonderful people who care for each other, offer hospitality to practical strangers, and who’ve got each others’ backs.

The real life stories of our neighbors help the listener to connect more deeply with the community that exists in our neighborhood. The true-to-life stories of acceptance and family-like care rattle loose the myths from media and urban legend they have come to hold true.

Quiet reflection begins. At this part in the conversation, it is my job to put together all of the pieces in a way that grips them, invites them to join us with presence and support. This is my moment to bring it home, to pique their interest even further. I break the silence by saying something like “Let me tell you more about so and so.” I describe a particular neighbor, someone who has interests that are similar to the person with whom I am speaking. I talk about the talents of my neighbor and mention a challenge or two, always focusing on giftedness. I emphasize what a blessing this neighbor is to me and suggest that perhaps the two meet.

Another round of questioning begins: “Does so-and-so work? How does so-and-so make a living?”

I have a choice to make here. I could outright answer the questions and give the details of my neighbor’s employment, or I could move the questioning in a different direction. Not a quick wit, I almost always simply answer the question. I wish, though, that I’d have a more cut-to-the-chase answer.

You see, American consumer capitalist culture is so pervasive that our sense of value and identity is based on whether someone has a salary-paying, “legitimate” job. Income and outcomes are the way we have been taught to measure a person’s worth. Our ingrained value system mirrors Pharaoh’s economy in ancient Egypt. In Pharaoh’s Totalist Economy, the Israelites were defined by whether they made bricks, more bricks, bricks without straw. Here, your worth is based on whether you are a hard worker, keep a job, or get a paycheck.

This is not the way of the Kingdom.
Can you imagine the conversation...

- Me: “Jesus, I’d like you to meet Shayla. She loves children, enjoys gardening, and makes an awesome lasagna. Shayla is wanting to connect with someone who can help her get fresh ingredients for her cooking.”
- Jesus: “Does Shayla have a job? Can she buy the food herself? How does Shayla support herself financially?”

Laughing out loud at the prospect of Jesus micromanaging Shayla’s career path, you can see the absurdity of this line of questioning.

Dear Church, we have lost our way. Jesus was and is concerned with an individual’s financial well being, but not in the sense of whether the individual is contributing to society in a market-value kind of way. The coauthors of *An Other Kingdom*¹ put it this way: “Both the Moses movement and the Jesus movement were radically off-market. They both called people to radical disciplines that resisted the powers that be. In the Moses movement you get the Ten Commandments, which are anti-Pharaoh mandates, and in the Jesus movement you get the Beatitudes, which are an imagination against Rome, The Roman Empire.” The Biblical practice of Sabbath is just one example of God’s life-giving way of resistance to market mentality, a protest against restless productivity. “Take a break from work,” God says. “Trust in my provision. I am a God of abundance. It is not you who is making a life for yourself. I am the giver of life.”

Our dependence and allegiance to the market economy has us so wrapped up in the value of a work ethic and a paycheck that we oftentimes fail to see the gifts of resilience, resourcefulness, and faithfulness in our midst. When the curious ask “Does he have a job?” my skeptic side wonders if the real hidden question is, “You’ve mentioned all these wonderful things about this person, but I know where they live and what kind of people live there, so tell me the truth: what’s wrong with this person? What is it that they’re not doing right?”

Perhaps it is as *An Other Kingdom* suggests: “The market ideology produces outsiders as a side-effect; they are another externalized cost of doing business. If you are well-off, it serves you well to be unwilling to acknowledge the poor. To acknowledge the underclass as gifted human beings, instead of labeled people, is destabilizing to empire. The market ideology needs explanations for the poor and the marginalized that keep the load on them. We claim it is their psychology, their culture, their education, the breakdown of the family. All of these rationalizations avoid questioning the market system.” We’ve gotten so mixed up, we’re asking the wrong questions of the wrong people.

Recently, Charlotte Mecklenburg County Public Schools (CMS) provided a survey to county residents regarding redistricting schools. One of the polls read, “Indicate your level of agreement to the following options for reducing concentrations of poverty in schools.” What is the problem as CMS defines it? Poor people. What is the solution according to CMS? De-concentrate the amount of poor people. Again, we’ve gotten so mixed up, we’re asking the wrong questions of the wrong people.

Let’s go back to the conversation with Jesus.
Me: “Jesus, I’d like you to meet Shayla...”

What question would Jesus ask? Would he tell a story? Would he invite himself over to Shayla’s house for dinner? Jesus knew a lot about gardening; would he start planting seeds? I’d like to think he’d have all sorts of imaginative responses, none of which would be related to Shayla’s economic productivity.

Immeasurable are the possibilities of God’s Kingdom, and yet our imaginations have become overwhelmed with one world order, the Empire. Thankfully, the Empire does not have everlasting dominion. There is a more whole and holy way, an “on earth as it is in heaven” way.

We can and must engage in relearning the way of neighborliness and abundance, the way of the Kingdom. With the Spirit’s wind emboldening the flame of our imagination, we are able to explore more possibilities than the Empire prescribes. We are given the power and creativity of the Holy One for this very moment, so that we might practice a more Jesus-like response. Playfulness, invitation, storytelling, dinner time, dirty hands, miracle working, and long walks—these are the ways of our Lord. May Jesus’ imaginative spirit inspire us to creatively follow him towards another, more life-giving way.

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i *An Other Kingdom* by John McKnight, Peter Block, and Walter Bruggemann.