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John 6:31–34, NRSVue.

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Take him by force to make him King.

Recently, the national news on various networks, along with numerous big city newspapers, and many websites reported that a very young woman died when she fell while free climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park. The death was ruled accidental, with the medical cause of death blunt force trauma. She apparently fell about 500 feet. Free climbing is, of course, when a climber doesn't use ropes or any other protective equipment. This sort of report, of a death or serious injury while free climbing, is quite common in Colorado. I'll get back to free climbing.

At the beginning of Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is near the Sea of Galilee. A large crowd is following him because they are stunned by the way he has been curing the sick. Jesus retreats up a mountain and, with a huge crowd having gathered and become hungry, he tells his Apostles to serve the five barley loaves and two fish that are in the possession of a small boy. This modest lunch ends up feeding five thousand people. When people see this miracle, they proclaim “*This*

is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” But Jesus is worried that the people are seeing him as some sort of worldly leader. We are told this: *“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”* While Jesus would eventually reveal himself as the Messiah of the Old Testament, he would never want to be an earthly king. His job wasn’t to do the main job of a worldly king, and that is to protect his people from invading armies, economic threats, and criminal activity.

In Chapter 16 of the Gospel of Matthew, there is a scene that occurs after Jesus feeds the five thousand, one that has generated enormous discussion over the centuries. Jesus comes into conflict with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Remember that the Pharisees taught in the local synagogues, but the Sadducees were typically wealthy, upper-class people who taught in the main Temple in Jerusalem; both groups were powerful politically, although the Sadducees held some authority over the Pharisees. The Great Evangelist Paul was a Pharisee. In this scene, the Pharisees and Sadducees dare Jesus to give him a sign from Heaven, to prove who he is. Jesus sidesteps this by telling these people that they may be able to interpret signs from the skies, but they cannot interpret the signs of the times. Jesus flees from these people, and he asks this Apostles who the people say he is. Jesus is told that some people think he is John the Baptist, while others think

he is the Prophet Elijah or Jeremiah. Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus tells Peter that he will build his church upon the Rock of Peter (his name means Rock), but Jesus sternly orders the disciples to not tell anyone that he is the Messiah. Why would Jesus not want the world to know he is the Messiah? Isn't that part of his job? This isn't the only place in the Gospels where Jesus tells his associates to keep his identity a secret. Why? The reason is that Jesus only wants to reveal this when he is very close to death. He fears that if people find out too soon, they will get the idea that he is an earthly king, come to begin a new kingdom on Earth. He doesn't want people to initiate an uprising against the Romans. Imagine what would happen if they rose up violently and Jesus did not destroy the Roman Empire. For the safety of his followers, he keeps his identity a secret at first. He's protecting people because he understands suffering and does not want to cause suffering – even if it means slowing his mission a bit.

Jesus knows that the Jews have long awaited a Messiah who would come and push aside the colonial empires that had swept in and conquered the Chosen People. These included the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Empires, not to mention the Egyptians who held them in slavery before they entered the Promised Land. Even up to the point of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem, just before being arrested, tried, and executed, many of the Jews of the

Holy Land still believe that any Messiah of theirs would be a worldly Messiah. Then, when they finally realize the truth, many of them turn on Jesus, demanding his execution. We know that Jesus did not come to Earth as an earthly leader. But he does perform miracles, such as curing lepers who had been ostracized from society because of their disease, raising Lazarus when he finds Lazarus' two sisters despondent over the man's death. The miracles are for two reasons: one, to show his power, to give him the authority he needs, and two, because he is a deeply good person and truly wants to help those in need. But he isn't trying to bootstrap his fame into worldly power. He never seeks adulation by attacking Romans.

Consider this story, a very famous one, taken from Matthew 22. Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees. They are trying to trap him into saying something that will get him in trouble with the law. They ask him if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. They hope that Jesus will oppose paying taxes to the Romans, as most Jews feel that the taxes are unfair and immoral. But Jesus, realizing he is being manipulated, asks to see a coin. Jesus asks whose head is on the coin. The Pharisees tell him that it is Caesar's. So, Jesus simply says: *"Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."* This is an important story. Jesus' tricky, dismissive answer tells us that he didn't care about government or economics. He has greater concerns. It's true that Jesus isn't just

apolitical. He is supra-political, meaning that he is above politics and economics. He transcends such temporal and temporary things.

Consider the story of Jesus tossing over the tables of the money changers at the Temple. Let's look at Mark 11, starting with verse 15:

¹⁵ Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

*'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?
But you have made it a den of robbers."*

¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Jesus isn't afraid of getting the religious authorities angry at him. He isn't dismissing economics and government, like he did with the question of taxes. This time, Jesus sees these issues as intersecting with his primary goal of building a Kingdom of God for all of eternity, not a Kingdom on Earth. Here are some interesting facts about offerings at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was considered sacrilegious to offer money in the Temple, if that money had Caesar's image on it. But most people were paid for their work in Roman money. So, they had to exchange that money for shekels at the Temple. But the money changers charged somewhere between 4 and 6 percent to change money. If they had to also break

a large coin and give the person back change, they charged for that, too. We are told this: *“he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.”* Other sorts of animals are being sold, like oxen and lambs, with lambs being the most common offering, but here is why Jesus is so angry at the dove sellers, in particular. You can’t offer up an animal that is blemished, even slightly. So, it is common for the priests at the Temple to declare an animal blemished – thus forcing the person to buy from them an animal to sacrifice. You can see how much money these people are making from folks who are just trying to honor God. Poor people have little money, of course, and the most they can afford is a dove. And you guessed it, the folks at the Temple overcharge for animals, including doves. Jesus, as we would expect, is showing an empathetic bond with poor people who were being ripped off right and left every time they go to the Temple. Notice, though, the consequences of Jesus’ actions:

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Jesus isn’t out to end the rule of the Roman Empire or to fire the Temple priests from their jobs. But he is willing to take great physical risk to defend the poor and to stop evil practices – and not just because he empathizes with them. Jesus quotes

Isaiah when he says: *‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of robbers.’* He’s making a strong statement by reminding them of the words of the great prophet. He is telling everyone that they corrupt their faith when they use it as a mechanism to make money.

Consider another Bible story, from Matthew, Chapter 20. Jesus is telling a parable. He’s talking about the amazing gift of forgiveness that is offered to all of us, regardless of whether we are a casual sinner or a deeply corrupt, terrible sinner. There is a man who owns a vineyard. There is a place where people stand in the morning, much like laborers do today, where they wait for someone to offer them day work. He hires a few and agrees to pay them a denarius for the day. Then throughout the day, more people come to the spot to be hired. He ends up paying each of them a denarius for their work – including the ones who only worked one hour in the scorching heat. Remember we are in a desert. The ones who were hired first and worked all day, probably for 12 hours, are angry. But the landowner says that they are paid fairly, and they should not be angry at the gift he offers others who worked less. God is like this with forgiveness. Many people in modern times have argued that this shows that Jesus did not believe in commerce, that he looked down his nose at capitalistic societies, that he believed that we all should be paid the same in life, that no one should have any way to obtain anything more

than anyone else. People have argued from this parable that Jesus was a radical socialist. But Jesus' message has to do with forgiveness, not economics.

There is a push in the U.S. today toward socialism, toward aggressive social programs, free medical care, and equal pensions for everyone – all supplied by the government. And people are dredging up that old argument that Jesus showed his disdain for open markets, capitalism, and any divide between the rich and the poor. But remember the story of Jesus' trial, taken from the Gospel of John. It's near the end of his life and ministry. Jesus stands before Pilate, and yes, when I was a young Catholic boy, I thought that the guy who killed Jesus flew planes. Pilate tries to pass off the judgement of Jesus to the Chief Priests, who have brought Jesus to him. Pilate says: *"Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law."* The Chief Priests wiggle out of this responsibility: *The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."* This is how the story plays out, with Pilate speaking first:

"I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ *Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."* ³⁷ *Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Jesus doesn't deny being a king. But he clarifies the issue, saying that if he were a worldly king, then there would be people who would be fighting for his freedom –

because he would be their ticket to freedom from Rome. Jesus says that his kingdom *“is not from here.”* In the Gospel of Matthew, just before Jesus is handed off to be crucified, Pilate turns to the crowd and asks them what he should do. Should he release the notorious prisoner Barabbas, or Jesus, the man who Pilate remarks *“is called the Messiah?”* Pilate even asks the crowd this of Jesus: *“What evil has he done?”* Only when this gets the crowd so riled up that Pilate is afraid that there will be a riot, does he relent, and order Jesus crucified. But Pilate washes his hands and declares: *“I am innocent of this man’s blood.”* Even Pilate, the prefect (or governor) sent from Rome to rule over the Holy Land by Emperor Tiberius, realizes that Jesus isn’t some nut who thinks that he is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Pilate sees something unworldly in Jesus.

When we make political or economic decisions, the Bible can only provide moral advice. I’m not minimizing the importance of that. But Jesus didn’t promote any earthly form of government or any financial system. When it comes to the examples that people use to argue that Jesus was a socialist or that Jesus thought that we should be ruled by a theocracy or that Jesus came here to fight the separation of wealth – none of these arguments fit the words and actions of Jesus.

Jesus had one overriding goal during the time he spent walking this Earth. Jesus doesn’t care if we love to free climb the most challenging, treacherous

mountainsides. He doesn't care that the U.S. government has a free climbing approach to economics, borrowing ever-increasing amounts of money to finance programs we cannot afford, something that will harm our children. Jesus cares about political and economic things only to the extent that they impact our faith and our ability to dedicate our lives to God. Jesus came to this Earth to keep us from free climbing up a moral mountainside. He did not come here to be taken by force and made a king. Human systems are temporary. He is concerned about permanent things, about our eternal life. I once talked at length to a young guy who had fallen while free climbing. He had extensive orthopedic injuries, but he was thankful that his spine and his brain were intact. I asked him if he would ever free climb again. He said "no," that he wouldn't have the nerve to do it again. But, he said, he knew now that he was very mortal – and that it was time for him to focus on his faith, something that his love of climbing had caused him to push aside. Please pray very briefly with me.

God, help us to stop free climbing our way through our spiritual lives. Give us the confidence to know that if we let you guide us every minute of every day, we will always climb toward you with complete safety and joy. We know that the things of this world are very temporary and only your world is permanent. Amen.