

“Ontology of Co-Belonging and a Record Setting Egg”
Epiphany 3C (January 27, 2019)
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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

An egg has made history on the internet. On January 4, someone - no one knows who (though there have been a few suggestions¹) - with the username “world_record_egg” posted a picture of a brown egg on Instagram, the social media site. It’s just an ordinary brown egg against a plain white background. The caption of the picture is “Let’s set a world record and get the most liked post on Instagram. Beating the current world record held by Kylie Jenner (18 million). We got this.” As of late this week, the picture of the egg had over 50 million likes on Instagram blowing past the record set by Kylie Jenner, the half-sister of Kim Kardashian, whose picture of her new baby was the previous record-holder with 18 million likes. Nate Erickson of *Esquire* magazine wrote that with over 50 million “likes” the egg has now been liked “more than any post, anywhere online, ever.”² Daniel Victor of *The New York Times* wrote an article trying to explain why an egg could get so much attention on social media. The first sentence of Victor’s article is, “Please, don’t expect any of the following to make sense.”³ “There’s nothing special about the egg,” he writes. “Seems like a fine enough egg. But [tens of millions of] people have liked it, dethroning Kylie Jenner’s birth announcement post.” “Is the egg encrusted with diamonds?” he asks. “Does the egg have a popular YouTube channel you’ve never heard of? Is a ... celebrity holding the egg? Nope. None of the above. Just an egg. That’s it.” We can’t “offer a grand perspective on why this happened,” he goes on. “Sometimes, the will of the internet just bends in peculiar ways, and in this case, the internet decided it was into that egg.”

When the egg picture cracked and fried the record, and left the internet scrambling, Kylie Jenner responded by posting a video of herself cracking a brown egg on the pavement. “Take that little egg,” she wrote.

Nate Erickson of *Esquire* tracked down the artist who first created the egg picture. The artist’s name is Sergei Platonov. “Platonov is a stock photographer, which means he makes money every time a person or an organization licenses his images A sudden increase in licensing for [the egg] photo is how he ended up discovering that his egg had become an internet phenomenon.” “I don’t really understand what people like in this egg,” said Platonov, the artist. “[I created the picture of the egg because I like eggs, especially] fried with bacon.” Why the egg picture has become so popular remains a mystery, but a 19-year-old expert in viral marketing on social media named Ishan Goel offered an explanation that has stuck with me: “To me,” he says, “[the success of the egg picture] indicates that people are yearning to find ways to connect in this increasingly digital world. The egg represents a common goal, a shared vision that people around the world could get behind.”⁴ Ishan Goel has been spotlighted in *Forbes* magazine for his expertise in viral

¹ See

https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancamillercole/2019/01/21/world_record_egg-how-wacky-is-the-future-of-marketing-going-to-be/#6ef15edf0305

² <https://www.esquire.com/food-drink/a25908789/instagram-egg-kylie-jenner-photographer-interview/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/style/egg-instagram-most-liked.html>

⁴ <http://toofab.com/2019/01/17/world-record-egg-instagram-kylie-jenner-viral-marketing-guru-ishan-goel-exclusive/>

marketing,⁵ so his explanation about the egg's success on Instagram holds weight. He says the egg picture helped people connect, helped them share a common goal and vision, and provided the opportunity for people to participate in something bigger than themselves. Connection. Vision. Participation. Those sound to me like things church can offer.

The UCC Book of Worship speaks eloquently about church. It speaks of the “rich diversity” of the church, and says “Christian worship” - the act we all participate in each Sunday - is “the communal and personal celebration . . . of God’s love for creation and for every human being.” Gathering each Sunday, says the Book of Worship, empowers us to “announc[e] the good news of God’s love for the world and invites all people to share God’s saving embrace.” Church is “ecumenical,” says the Book of Worship; church is “inclusive,” it says; church is a place to announce God’s love for all people; and church is “communal,” it says. Church brings people together around a common vision of God’s love for all, and invites each of us to participate in God’s saving work in the world. Church connects us; church lays out a common vision for us to live into; church invites us to participate in something bigger than ourselves. Connection. Vision. Participation.

One of Christianity’s first books of worship, the Didache, written around 100 CE, speaks of church in this way. It exhorts followers of Jesus to gather each Sunday, “break bread and give thanks.” It encourages followers of Jesus to seek “peace” among themselves and in the world, and invites them to follow the example of Jesus when they pray and to do acts of charity. “As for your prayers and acts of charity and all your actions,” it says, “do them all just as you find them in the gospel of our Lord.” And, the Didache exhorts early Christians to “gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit [our] souls.” It invites early Christians to connect with each other in community, and to participate in a common vision of following the example of Jesus. Connection and vision and participation.

All three are found in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians - a portion of which we heard a moment ago. First Corinthians was written sometime in the mid-50s of the first century to a group of early Jesus followers living in a cosmopolitan city. Ancient Corinth was a hub of commerce and trade, and also religion. Temples built to honor members of the Greek pantheon were scattered throughout the city: temples to Apollo and Poseidon and Aphrodite, shrines to honor Asklepios - the god of healing, and a temple to honor the imperial cult of Rome - state-sponsored emperor worship. And ancient Corinth, like most cities in the first century, had small-group gatherings called “Associations,” some of which met in members’ houses, where people could come together, share a meal, enjoy fellowship, and pay homage to a patron deity - say, Hermes, the god of commerce in the case of a trade guild association. The first Christian churches that Paul established may have been started as associations where people gathered in a home, connected over a meal, and participated in a common vision of being like Christ.

Paul and the Christians in Corinth exchanged several letters in the mid-first century. Scholars call these letters the “Corinthian Correspondence,” only a portion of which is preserved in our New Testament under the titles First and Second Corinthians. But the titles are misleading, since “First” Corinthians was not written first; and “Second” Corinthians is a compilation of several spliced letters edited over time. We sometimes forget 20 centuries

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/laura-inamedinova/2016/09/05/5-networking-tips-on-how-to-reach-most-influential-people-from-a-17-year-old-ishan-goel/#396040cde816>

later that we're peering over the Corinthians' shoulders when studying these letters - we're basically reading someone else's mail, reading about how Paul and the Corinthians dealt with specific, first century concerns. Concerns like whether the Corinthians could eat meat that had been offered to Greek gods in Corinthian temples but was now on sale in the food market; concerns like how to understand sexuality in a time when prostitutes plied their trade in the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love; concerns over whether Communion was an actual meal, as in other associations, or a symbol of Christ's body and blood; concerns over the issue of bodily resurrection in a Platonic age when the body was viewed as a prison one longed to be freed from; and concerns over economic equality in church in a time when many lived in tenements and few had the space in their houses to host a church service. First Corinthians is Paul's response to these many concerns; and he moves systematically through the list, introducing each of his answers to the Corinthians' questions with the phrase "now concerning..." "Now concerning food sacrificed to idols," he writes, in answer to their question about meat sacrificed in Greek temples. "Now concerning" sexual ethics, he writes, in answer to their question about sexuality and religion. "Now concerning the Lord's Supper," he writes, in answer to their question about meals in associations. And to the issue of equality and diversity in the church, Paul writes in today's reading, "Now concerning spiritual gifts." Paul then provides a list of gifts in the church: gifts of wisdom and knowledge and faith and healing and prophetic words and discernment and interpretation. Paul often lists gifts and talents in his letters, but the lists in his letters aren't identical, so parsing what each gift means is less important than the fact that there is a list. His point is that everyone who gathers in a church has something to offer; that everyone matters here; that together we make church happen; and that each one of our gifts and talents is put to work by God's spirit for the good of us all. Paul calls it "the common good." Church is where we connect across difference; church is where we participate together in a common vision of unity. Connection and vision and participation. Paul calls us a "body" - some of us are hands that work to tend the church's building and grounds, and hands who make music; some of us are hearts that care for the needy and show compassion to the broken; some of us are feet who go out to put faith into action; some of us are brains who teach children and youth, and brains who manage our finances and teach our adults; some of us are vocal chords who sing; some of us are eyes and ears who are attentive to things no one else sees or hears; the list of gifts goes on and on - church is a rainbow of diversity - but we are all - each one of us - part of the single "body of Christ," connecting with each other to participate in a common vision of building a better world.

It's a vision that's very much in the spirit of today's Old Testament reading from Psalms, which speaks of all people finding shelter under God's wings; and speaks of all people sharing a common table filled with "rich fare"; and of all people basking in and then glowing with divine light. The church is meant to be a microcosm of this grand vision - a grand vision that philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls the "ontology of co-belonging": a fundamental, basic trait of human beings to connect with each other and participate together in something bigger than themselves,⁶ as in the many "likes" the anonymous egg post received on Instagram.

This co-belonging - this togetherness, this sharing of our gifts - is something we have seen recently in many places. Many places, like in a Sikh community in San Antonio. Journalist Ahmed Sharma reported that a Sikh community was "offering free vegetarian meals ... [to]

⁶ The phrase actually comes from an article about Sloterdijk's philosophy. See: <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/para.2017.0222>

all government employees during the shutdown”⁷ ““We are here to support those federal employees who are not getting their paycheck,,” said the President of the Sikh community, ““and we really appreciate their services ... and we believe our nation should appreciate and give gratitude to those men and women who are doing wonderful service for us, but are not getting paid to The least we could do is support them with a hot meal”” The food was made fresh each day by volunteers in the community, who arrived at 4 am to start preparing. ““We don’t worry about one community,”” said the Sikh President. ““We all belong to one race, which is the human race,”” he said. ““We ... are all brothers and sisters and we need to support each other no matter who we are. We may [be a] different color, different class or religion, or social and economic status, but at the end of the day, we are all [family].””

This co-belonging - connecting and participating in a common vision of blessing all people was seen in a *Washington Post* article about air traffic controllers from Canada.⁸ The Canadian air traffic controllers wondered how they could help their counterparts in Anchorage, Alaska who were working without pay during the shutdown. The Canadian solution was to send pizza. “It was a ‘small gesture of kindness,’ the president of the Canadian Air Traffic Control Association [said], but a ‘big gesture of solidarity.’” Other Canadian airports and air traffic controllers followed suite. They sent three dozen pizzas to their counterparts in New York accompanied by a note in all-caps: “PIZZA!!” And eventually 300 pizzas were sent to more than 40 U.S. sites. The pizza campaign was dubbed on Twitter: #pizzadiplomacy. “Air traffic controllers in Canada and the United States are very close, constantly ‘handing off’ planes to one another. ‘It’s kind of a unique situation,’” said one Canadian controller, ““because these are co-workers you may never see in your life but nevertheless you’re working with them hand in hand. The aviation industry is a huge family,”” he said. ““You feel like you’re part of something much bigger than yourself””

And this co-belonging - connection, and envisioning and participating together - can be seen in the many stories of other faith communities in areas hardest hit by the shutdown hosting community meals and starting food banks, offering barber shop services and gift cards to furloughed workers, proclaiming a basic message that we’re all in this together; that we are all part of a single community; and that we all contribute to and participate in a single vision - a vision we recite here in our local church every time someone becomes a member. It’s a vision formulated as a question that we ask all new members: Will you, as best as you are able, work with us in the spirit of Christ to create a better world for all people? Today, on Annual Meeting Sunday, as we marvel at all of the gifts and talents and activities in our church - all the parts of this single body - we also reaffirm our commitment to making the world a better place by answering that new member question with the words, We will with the help of God. Amen.

⁷ <https://news4sanantonio.com/news/local/sas-sikh-community-feeds-federal-agents-during-government-shutdown>

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2019/01/14/us-air-traffic-controllers-have-been-working-without-pay-their-canadian-counterparts-sent-pizza/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-air-traffic-shutdown%3Acanadian-counterparts-sent-pizza%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Atransportation&utm_term=.c06d290896c3