

11/21/21 Sermon John 18:33-37

Before we really get into the sermon, I want you to know that I will be talking about the Kyle Rittenhouse trial and verdict and issues of racism and white supremacy. I want to acknowledge that these aren't easy issues to talk about or deal with. Some of you may be tired of hearing about them. I encourage you to keep listening because our Black siblings don't have the luxury of not listening, but if hearing about these issues will harm you emotionally or mentally, I encourage you to take this sermon time in reflective prayer or another self-caring activity.

Our reading from the gospel of John today leaves out the final verse of that particular exchange between Pilate and Jesus. After Jesus says "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice," Pilate responds "What is truth?" I can't read that question from Pilate without thinking of how Tim Rice expanded it in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar. Pilate asks: "And what is 'truth?' Is truth unchanging law? We both have truths. Are mine the same as yours?" Jesus doesn't get a chance to respond in scripture. I don't think Pilate ever meant him to. Pilate is, of course, thinking of earthly truth. Jesus is on another level, one that Pilate completely misses. Are Pilate and Jesus talking about the same kind of truth?

It is the Reign of Christ Sunday, more traditionally known as Christ the King Sunday. This is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday we start Advent, the preparation for Christ's birth. Reign of Christ Sunday centers on Christ's rulership of not just the world but the entire universe. You have probably heard sermons on Christ's kingship before--how Christ doesn't look like earthly kings, how the term 'king' is inadequate to describe the type of community that we believe God envisions for us here on earth. When we think of kings we often think of someone who doesn't care about anyone but themselves or their own self-interest. Even a benevolent king is fairly removed from the people, in a castle far away from the everyday joys and concerns of the majority of the population. Christ isn't like that.

We use terms like 'king' and 'justice' and 'mercy' when describing Christ's reign very easily. For me as a life-long Christian I tend to assume others know what I mean when I talk about these things. We often pray for these things. We pray for justice and mercy. We pray for equality and equity. We pray for Christ's idea of the world to become our idea of the world. We pray for earth to be more like heaven, and sometimes that feels very far away.

This week as I watched the fall out of the Kyle Rittenhouse verdict, heaven on earth feels very far away. As you probably know, Kyle Rittenhouse, who killed two white men and wounded one another in Kenosha, WI last year during protests against the police shooting of a Jacob Blake, a Black man, was found not guilty on all counts of homicide and reckless endangerment on Friday. This legal decision is being applauded by some and lamented by others. It's an incredibly complicated situation made even more complicated by who is celebrating or lamenting what. It's uncertain if Rittenhouse himself has any connection to extremist groups, but many extremist groups are happy to see him walk free.

The most disturbing types of extremist groups who are celebrating this verdict are proponents of one of the most deadly sins known to this world--white supremacy. That feels like a very strong word--sin. That's not a word I use a lot. But if sin is something that separates us from God's love and Christ's eventual reign, white supremacy is indeed a sin. Why are white supremacists celebrating this verdict? Some say it's because Kyle Rittenhouse killed anti-racism protesters. Others are saying this verdict may empower white supremacists to use more violence in public. It's not entirely clear.

The kind of world we believe it is our call to help create is not the kind of world white supremacists want to build. That has become more and more obvious to me as I have participated with many of you in this congregation in our year-long study *White Privilege: Let's Talk*, the book study on *The New Jim Crow*, and most recently the book study on *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. White supremacy, white privilege, the history and current day policies we know are racist aren't easy things for us to study. It calls into question beliefs we have long-held about ourselves, our religion, and our country. I've read some pro-slavery sermons, and they make my stomach turn. How could anyone use my faith to justify such a thing? I hear Christians say things like God has ordained the United States as a white nation, and I get so angry. How could anyone use my faith to justify that idea? How can you believe what I believe and say those things? The simple answer is, we don't believe the same things. We share the same name-- Christians-- but not the same vision of what God wants for the world. I believe Christ's reign will mean equity for all people. I believe Christ's reign will mean justice for the historically discriminated against. I believe Christ's reign will mean all tears will be dried, all violence will cease, and all divisions we have created between different kinds of people will be destroyed. I also believe that these things are too important to wait for Christ's return. We are the hands and feet of Christ. We pray every week that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Who is here on earth now to do those things? Us. Us!

We are a majority white church, and even though we are trying we can't claim we are completely free from racism in our lives. There's a whole lot of stuff built into our society that favors white people and discriminates against people of color. We inherited a lot of it, and we need to work to get rid of as much as we can so that the generations below us don't inherit as much of it. You may be asking the same question that I am -- Can we fully achieve Christ's reign on earth as it is in heaven? I believe we can with God's help. It may not happen in our lifetimes, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth working for.

To close our time of reflection, I'd like us to participate in a prayer. The United Church of Christ published this yesterday in response to the Rittenhouse verdict. This Litany was written by Dr. Sharon R. Fennema. Please join me.

One: Holy One, Ruler of rulers, Sovereign of sovereigns, Judge of judges, we come to you with feelings more than with words, trusting that there is nothing that a prayer is better suited for than the weariness or rage or confusion that lives in our breath and bones, our cells and sighs.

All: O God, we need your fierce love, Christ, we need your tender rage, O God, we need your collective power, so we can know freedom.

One: We pray with those of us whose anger ignites at this miscarriage of justice, whose deep hurt at the reminders of how little some lives matter and how broken our systems remain, has become the bright light of rage.

All: Christ, who is our only Ruler, we are desperate for your reign of prophetic fire. Empower us to pledge our hearts to embody the kind outrage that turns the tables on the violence inflicted on your beloved children.

One: We pray with those of us who are not surprised by this verdict, who know what a mostly white jury means, who recognize how small and furtive justice must be in a system bound by white supremacy.

All: Christ, who is our only Sovereign, we are longing for your kin-dom to come. Find us in our pessimism and lead us in the ways of accountability that transforms that our hope may be renewed by your vision of just mercy.

One: We pray with those of us who trust this decision, who have confidence that this outcome shows us the truth of what happened, who want to believe that equality and fairness are the heart of our legal system.

All: Christ, who is our only Judge, we are praying for your righteousness. Convert our unquestioning allegiance and deepen our understanding of the histories that shape us, that we may be convicted by your love to change our minds about what is true, and right, and just.

One: To the one who loves us and frees us, we lift up our prayers, that our anger might become sacred fire, cleansing and renewing the earth; that our despair might become hopeful vision, guiding us toward freedom; that our confidence might become humble curiosity, bringing your promised reign closer to us.

All: To God be glory and dominion, forever and ever. Amen.