

The Question Isn't "Where?" but "What?" (John 18-33-37)

I remember seeing Steven Johns-Boehme after 9/11. The world was still pretty shaken up. I'd just started as pastor at a new church, and Steven (who was an associate Regional Minister) came over to make sure I was getting along all right.

He walked through the door of the church. I stuck out my hand and said, "Hey Steven, how're you doing?"

Somehow the question seemed to catch him off guard, because he stopped, thought about it for a beat, and said, "Pretty good for a world where people fly planes into buildings."

I thought about those words the other day, as I was getting ready to go out Friday evening. I'd told Susan I would go with her to help feed the animals at the Tribe animal sanctuary. And I was putting my boots on when I heard about the not-guilty verdict

that came back in the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. Maybe you heard about it too. It was minor story, hardly covered by the press.

Anyway, to recap: a 17 year-old White kid from Illinois brought an illegally obtained AR-15 across state lines to Kenosha, Wisconsin to a charged protest over the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, two days earlier by the police. While there Rittenhouse shot and killed two men, wounding a third. After a trial in front of a—how shall I put this—judge who repeatedly demonstrated his partiality, Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted.

As I turned on the news and scrolled through Twitter, I was struck by the level of anger and grief on the part of those who fear this verdict signals a green light to copycat killers. These people—having increasingly been given permission over the past five years—take their extensively curated sense of White grievance and wear it as a badge of honor and patriotism. They then use this sense of having suffered some sort of profound

indignity as an excuse to make sure Black people “remember their place.”

After the verdict came back, the sense of outrage and lamentation was palpable by those who wanted only to see Kyle Rittenhouse answer for what he did. I can’t tell you how many people were quick to point out the reality we all know to be true that if the tables had been turned and a Black youth with an assault rifle traveled to another state and killed two people and wounded another, that that young man—if he lived through the initial police encounter—would be serving the second day of a life sentence today.

But what I found even more chilling was the observation that for many of our Black siblings, the most painful part of Friday wasn’t the “not-guilty” verdict—because they have no illusions about whether a White man will be held accountable for killing people in a racially charged atmosphere; it was the **reaction** of glee and pride on the part of so many White people that Kyle Rittenhouse

was acquitted. Outraged by the acquittal, these people are certain that because of his new notoriety and quasi-hero status to, Kyle Rittenhouse is going to have a gold-plated future. There were two congresspeople who said they would arm wrestle over the chance to give this young vigilante a congressional internship.

But the fact that this he's been made into an icon for a whole segment of our society, means that there are lot of people who are way more afraid for their lives and the lives of their children today than they were yesterday.

The irony, of course, is that the people who are cheering on this pitiable young man claim that the reason they're so wedded to guns and the idea that they should be able to carry them anywhere (even Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta, apparently), is because they're afraid of rising crime.

Interestingly enough, these same people don't appear to be afraid of crimes committed by White supremacists brandishing assault weapons—only crimes that involve People of Color.

Now, I don't want to make fun of anybody's fear. Far from it. Fear is a very real thing, and we can't just stop being afraid because somebody tells us to.

On the other hand, the definition of courage isn't a **lack** of fear, it's doing the right thing in **spite** of your fear.

Fred Craddock tells the story about the time when his wife, Nettie, went away for the weekend and he was left to fend for himself. Having been left in charge of cooking his own meals, he went to the store to pick up some supplies.

Not entirely sure where everything was, he saw a woman with a child in her cart and he called to her, "Excuse me, ma'am, could you tell me where I can find the peanut butter?"

The woman placed her hand on the child's shoulder, and her eyes began darting up and down the aisle to see if she was alone with

this stranger. Not seeing anyone else she turned her back hurried toward the other end of the aisle, clutching her purse in one hand and her child in the other. As she reached the end of the row, she looked back over her shoulder, and then she was gone.

Puzzled, and extremely self-conscious, Fred kept looking for the peanut butter. After some time, he finally found where it was located and pulled a jar off the shelf. Just then, the woman and her child turned down the aisle and saw him putting the jar in his cart.

"Oh, you really **were** looking for the peanut butter," she said.

"Yes."

"Well, you can't be too careful these days," she said with a shrug.

He turned to face her and said, "Oh yes, lady, you can."

It's possible to live in fear, and to fail to live lives recognizable to Jesus—the one who ***embraced*** his fear, who—when presented with the opportunity to let love show the way—was never shy about walking down the dark alleys where fear lives and appears to call the shots.

I mean look at our Gospel for today. Jesus stands accused before Pilate, governor of Judea. He's a rabble rouser, this Jesus, a threat to good political order—which was a problem. The Roman Empire, stretched as thin as it was, dealt with possible challenges to its rule with deadly vigilance—and Pontius Pilate has a reputation for being one of the fiercest protectors of Roman dominance.

Jesus has built a reputation that positions him as the potential leader of an insurrection. Even Jesus' closest followers are convinced that this particular Messiah would follow messianic tradition by leading a violent uprising against the Roman occupation forces—which is why when the authorities came to

arrest Jesus, according to the writer of John's Gospel, Peter picked up a sword and started hacking away. He was convinced that the revolution was beginning, and he wanted to get his licks in early.

And why **wouldn't** Jesus' followers assume that he'd pick violence as the first club to pull out of his insurgent's golf bag?

That's the way the world works, right? You fear that your enemies will upset the nice world you've created for yourself, so you view them as a threat. This, of course, is how we got January 6th.

Pilate certainly assumes that Jesus is a threat. He starts the whole trial by asking, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

In other words, "Are you going to be a problem for me? Do you seek to establish a kingdom that will be a threat to the one I represent?"

Jesus responds to this interrogation by saying, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from here" (John 18:36).

And Jesus, who is about to be killed by the state out of fear, is right. Only, we tend to think that "my kingdom is not from this world" is a reference to some celestial dominion, far removed from the world in which we live. And immediately, people's eyes glaze over, thinking about pearly gates and streets of gold.

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says.

So, where is his kingdom from?

We've tended to think of Jesus' response as a reference to a different place, as an answer to the question "where?"

Out there, where the roll is called up yonder. In the sweet by and by. "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through ... "

But I remain more and more convinced that Jesus' mention of a "kingdom not from this world" isn't a spatial reference, a question of "where." I think the appropriate question to pose to Jesus' claim of a "kingdom not from this world" isn't "where?" but "what?"—more specifically, "what kind?"

The kingdom to which Jesus refers **is** from a different world, not in terms of spatial location, but in terms of quality and character.

Pontius Pilate deals with Jesus from fear, as a threat. And how do we deal with threats in this world?

We isolate them, dehumanize them. We stick them in ghettos, put them in prisons, sequester them in internment camps. But for God's sake, keep them away from **us**. And if none of those things work, we invest in ever more ingenious ways red-line them into financial obscurity.

Same as it ever was.

But Jesus doesn't deal with others first as threats to be feared; he embraces them as siblings created and loved by God, and therefore, deserving of our profoundest attempts at love and welcome.

So, when Jesus says his "kingdom is not from this world," he ain't kidding. The kind of realm over which Jesus reigns appears unintelligible to a world that believes threats are to be eliminated (by violence if necessary). Any reign that takes as its organizing principle the need to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" is bound to appear alien to this world.

Following Jesus is risky. Indeed, his "kingdom is not from this world"—a world in which fear of the "other" drives us to deal with threats in deadly earnestness. As a result, the domain his **followers** serve isn't "from this world" either.

So, if you want to follow Jesus, risk is what you signed up for.

Syrian refugees. Muslims. Transgender people. Black people. Gay people. Houseless and the hungry people. All the children of the world.

If you're afraid, that's fine. Fear is something that just is. But if you're going to follow Jesus you're going to have to learn how to be faithful in the **face** of your fears. You're going to have to learn how to love those whom you don't understand, those whom you fear—not as abstractions, not as categories, not as threats—but as individuals, as human faces, as children of God.

Fear and violence cannot define our relationship to those who are different from us, in the same way that fear and violence cannot define Jesus' kingdom, which is not from this world."

But if fear and violence don't define the realm of Jesus' reign, what does? What might such a kingdom look like? Not just in

ancient times, but right now? Right here in the middle of a world busy cannibalizing itself, living on the blood and tears of its children? What might a “kingdom not from this world” actually look like for ***us***?

Six years ago, Paris was the site of a terrorist attack. This attack claimed the lives of 89 people at a music concert. Among those killed in the gunfire was a young mother and wife, Helene Mual-Leiris.

Still grieving, her husband, Antoine, wrote a letter on Facebook to the attackers—a letter that I think helps us to see the contours of the world Jesus is talking about—the world Jesus envisions as he talks to his eventual executioner about his kingdom that “is not from this world.”

Here’s an excerpt from the letter Antoine Leiris wrote to those who killed his wife, the mother of his son:

I will not give you the gift of hating you. You have obviously sought it but responding to hatred with anger would be to give in to the same ignorance that that has made you what you are. You want me to be afraid, to cast a mistrustful eye on my fellow citizens, to sacrifice my freedom for security. Lost. Same player, same game.

*We are only two, my son and I, but we are more powerful than all the world's armies. In any case, I have no more time to waste on you, I need to get back to Melvil who is waking up from his afternoon nap. He's just 17 months old; he'll eat his snack like every day, and then we're going to play like we do every day; and every day of his life this little boy will insult you with his happiness and freedom. Because you don't have **his** hatred either.*

So, how are **you** doing this Sunday?

In a world where people fly planes into buildings, in a world where young White men can shoot people with impunity and schools and soccer games and music concerts are sometimes literal battle fields, in a world where violence isn't the last resort but the preferred response to fear ... how are **any** of us doing?

I don't know, but you can't be too careful these days.

I can hear Antoine Leris; I can hear Jesus: Oh yes, my friends, you can.

—Amen.