

## Why Is It Wrong?—Sixth Sunday of Easter

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[Acts 16:9-15](#)

[Psalm 67](#)

[Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5](#)

[John 14:23-29](#)

*Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT*

It would seem that most folks in our nation, in our world, might agree: that what happened in Buffalo, New York, last weekend is wrong. Let's just use first names. A young man named Payton traveled very far to a town called Buffalo to destroy the lives of people with highly melanated skin—because he thinks they are taking away things and resources that belong to him only because he has skin with less melanin in it. Payton killed Aaron, Ruth, Pearly, Katherine, Heyward, Celestine, Roberta, Margus, Andre, and Geraldine. Payton also injured Zaire, Jennifer and Christopher. He destroyed their lives and the lives of their families; and marked them with incredible suffering.

But, weirdly enough, I don't think it is easy for us to agree, as a nation, why this is wrong. You'll probably say that's stupid, I think. You know: It's a crime to kill people, it's just wrong. It's wrong to single out people because of the amount of melanin in their skin and believe certain lies our culture tells us about them too. It's racist, it's wrong.

But why is it wrong to kill people?

As a nation, we kill lots of people here and people of other nations, all the time. You'll say, that's different, they were our enemies, they are criminals... they deserved it. Payton said these 10 were his enemies too. He said they deserved it.

You see the trouble: As a nation of people, we tend to talk out of both sides of our mouths. The end-all beat-all truth does not reside with America. We all gather in this place to hear truth. And we all confess here that Christ is the way, the life and the truth. So, we can only judge, in the end, what is right or wrong, as followers of Jesus, as believers in Christ.

And as the baptized, as the Church, the Body of Christ, we believe there is a specific reason why it's wrong to kill people. And why it's wrong to believe racist ideas about other people too. The reason is deeply embedded and woven into our lessons this morning.

St. Paul was a Judean, born and raised. St. Paul, before he followed Christ, was an enemy of Jesus' followers. And not only of Jesus' followers, but as a Judean he was an enemy of all outsiders. The bible-word for outsiders, people different from the Judeans and Israelites, was Gentile. If you are a Gentile, you then belong to one of the other "nations." You heard that word "nations" in our Psalm this morning: "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy"—that doesn't mean, nations, like the United Nations, like countries. The better word for "nations"—is ethnicities. Ethnos, is the Greek word for "nations."

So, Paul, a supreme insider, a Pharisee, an observer of the law of the Israelites, a Judean's Judean—he has an encounter in the Book of Acts with Christ on the road to Damascus one day. And Christ comes to Paul, knocks him down, makes him blind for a while, and says: "Why are you persecuting me?" (Paul was hurting Jesus' followers, not Christ, but that's an important detail which we'll get back to it later.)

So, Saul, (his original name was Saul) is taken aback of course by this experience. And after this, Saul goes on an adventure and Christ opens his eyes to see that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, buried, and who rose again, was a true manifestation, an en-fleshment, of God. He was the Christ, the anointed one.

So, Paul starts to tell people that this is true. He starts hashing it out with his own people, since they respect him, Pharisee that he was. But soon, in the Book of Acts, the story of Paul cracks open. And in the past several weeks we've been hearing about Peter too. How Peter is eating with Gentiles, Gentiles are receiving the Holy Spirit, Gentiles are part of the story too.

Now, it's happening to Paul. We heard it today. Paul is traveling around in the Roman Empire telling all the Judeans who live spread throughout it about Jesus and about Christ, because he happens to be a Roman citizen, he's got a Passport. But today we hear that a non-Judean, a Gentile, a Macedonian in a vision calls out to him.

Paul has had some training at this point with how God works. He's been struck blind, he's heard Christ say that Christ is in all things, all people. Remember: why are you persecuting "me" Christ's voice said. So, Paul sees a vision of a man in need: And his response is: "we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, [that is, Greece] being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them."

So, they go, they end up in Philippi, which is a Roman colony for veterans. This place is a mix of Greeks and Macedonians, unclean Gentiles, and Roman soldiers: the kind who, for example, destroy Judean temples, and crucify Judean people. Paul and his companions are the belly of the very far away-not safe-very unfamiliar beast.

They go, they find some women, they share their truth with them and the women pay attention: God blesses their new relationship. The women believe and are baptized—households and all—they all join God's family. And Paul and his companions are welcomed and shown hospitality.

This story helps us know why the killing in Buffalo is wrong. All people, of all ethnicities, God declares in Scripture today, belong to God's family. Because God chose to be born, because of Christ, we—just like Paul and Peter, are invited to forget selfish and ignorant divisions between people.

The lesson from Revelation and our Psalm only repeat the same message. The Psalm today is a prayer for safety and peace. But not just for Israel, not just for Judea.

3Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.

4Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity and guide all the nations on earth.

5Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.

6The earth has brought forth its increase;  
God, our own God, has blessed us.

7May God give us blessing,  
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe.

All the ends of the earth can praise and stand in awe of God, why? Because a God, we believe and Scripture teaches us, made them. This God has made them, this God has blessed them, This God loves them. They all belong to this God. That is the most clear, Biblical reason why racism is wrong—why ideas, policies and laws made under the influence of ideas which say some “nations” some “ethnicities” some “cultures” are somehow superior or more deserving of resources—are wrong. It's simply incorrect from Biblical standpoint.

And, if you needed more convincing, which I know you of course don't: look at the beautiful vision from the book of Revelation this morning What is the end game? What does God desire in the end? What is the promised life that God is bringing about?

A new creation. That is a city. A realm where the only light—the only way people see people—is the illumination of Christ. We never actually see light, the scientists among us know, we see light reflecting and dancing on the surface of things. In this new creation, we will see Christ truly revealed **in all the nations**, in each of them, in all of them. Here in this new city, this new realm, God promises: falsehood, like racism—abominations, like murder, cannot enter.

And at the center of this new realm, where we can finally see Christ in all and all—is water. Precious, clean, cooling, life-giving water. Water of baptism, water of oceans, water of birth. And this water feeds a tree, the author of Revelation says, which produce fruit each month—twelve fruits, twelve months, always in season, eternally life-giving. What is the fruit for, what is the purpose of the trees? We heard: for the healing of the nations. Of all people. All ethnicities. Highly melanated people and people with less melanin. Hip hop and honky-tonk. City and country.

The divisions we make—God does not make. The hurts we sow—God is planning to heal.

So, as I close today, I wonder if you're not thinking: Hey, Pastor: I don't know, this Payton kid, he was just crazy, he has mental health problems—it's just a tragedy. But I want to caution you about that. I have been around long enough to know that racist ideas which caused these deaths, the falsehoods and abominations forbidden in the New Jerusalem, are alive and well in our culture.

There is good news today: God has made all, Christ is in all, and the Holy Spirit teaches us all—keep this good news close to your heart and mind. Because I do think, frighteningly often, actually, our nation cannot figure out what is wrong, and why. Racist ideas, of all kinds, are wrong. Murder is wrong. Because they contradict what God made, who Christ is, and what the Spirit teaches.

*Amen.*