

Reign of Christ Sunday
 November 25, 2018
 “Love Wins”
 Susan Fast

Pray with me: “Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me.”¹

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” 1 John 4: 7.

This Sunday is the church year’s new-year’s eve. The new church year begins with Advent which starts next Sunday. It’s fitting to talk of Christ’s status as supreme ruler today, on Reign of Christ Sunday. In what way are we to respond?

Since the United States was founded as a democratic alternative to the power structure of a monarchy, most Americans do not have first-hand knowledge of that system. Even so, fantasy novels, children’s books, fairy tales, cartoons, and other media feature stories based on a monarchy. Those stories tug at our imagination and glamorization of splendor – personal splendor, and opulent castles.

A number of our fairy tales end with the crowning of a good king, and a royal wedding. Our children dress up as pint-sized princesses and princes, to pretend that they have the privileges of rule, without the responsibilities. Neither that model, nor the British figurehead monarchy matches the model of divinely-ordained just rule, which originated in the ancient Near East.

“A monarch is divinely chosen to represent God’s reign on earth, and as God’s representative is the offspring of God.” He or she is not chosen to flaunt power and exploit this privilege, but rather to serve both God and the people. In this model, a king or queen is a public servant, who, like God, protects and speaks up for the poor and disenfranchised, when others would exploit their powerlessness.”²

“Others” . . . such as some of the modern world’s leaders.

When we celebrate the reign of Christ, we lift up the ideal of just rule as the gold standard to which we can all aspire. By following Jesus’ example of leadership, we strive – by the ways we interact with other people and beings -- we can work toward a just rule in which each of us is a true public servant. And, like the early Christians who proclaimed that Jesus, not

Caesar, is Lord, we can declare boldly: “Jesus is my public servant.”²

Rules: we do need rules. From the Gospel of Mark, which David read this morning: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Mark 12: 30-31.

In August of 2017, faith leaders faced white nationalists and Nazis during the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The faith leaders were not armed; the white nationalists and Nazis were. Here are some comments from the faith leaders’ experiences:

“It really felt like every step you take could be your last.”³

“They had their guns and shields. We had our songs, our faith, our love. And we had each other.”⁴

“We sang, ‘Love has, love has, love has already won,’ even in the face of those guns.”⁵

In an interview, Brittany Caine-Conley said: “White supremacists were descending on our town... in order to make us fearful... We wanted to say that we’re not afraid. In those moments, you can feel your own fear and anxiety, but that’s why we had trained for so long.

“Most of us were there because we felt called by God to put our own bodies on the line, so that marginalized and oppressed people don’t have to continue to be the only ones who receive violence. We take on that violence. So yeah, it was scary, but we wanted to say this is not who we are, and that love wins.

“That was one thing that we were continuing to chant, that love has already won here and that we will not — as people of faith, as people of Charlottesville — we will not allow white supremacy to take over who we are..... We really felt that our presence was able to change the narrative and change the dynamic of the space.”⁶ Working toward a just rule, in which each of us is a true public servant.

Now allow me to introduce you to Ken Parker, on the side opposing the Charlottesville faith leaders. Parker grew up outside Chicago. He said that he did not hear racist beliefs in his

churchgoing Baptist family. And yet, as an adult, Parker lived in a world of bigotry and hate, immersed in white supremacist ideology. He wore the green robes of a grand dragon in the Ku Klux Klan. Racist catchphrases riddled his public speeches. His Facebook photo shows him bare-chested, a swastika tattoo on his chest and a gun cradled in his arm. What on Earth happened to Ken Parker?

In many ways, Parker was the perfect recruit for the hate movement, the spread of right-wing extremism. Let's see why. He had been 11 years in the Navy, which a friend of mine says can result in behavior called "the nanny complex." Career men in the military can grow accustomed to being told what, and when to do; and can be lost when discharged. Parker felt lost without the camaraderie and rank structure of the military – and even more alone after his marriage collapsed and his wife left him. Parker's path is an almost textbook example of how hate group members are radicalized.

One rainy night in early 2012, as he and his now-ex-wife shuffled through shows on Netflix, they stumbled on programs about neo-Nazi skinheads and the Ku Klux Klan. As they watched a show about the KKK, the oldest hate group in the country, his wife said to him: "You should look them up," Parker recalled. "They seem right up your alley."

Parker reached out to Klan groups he found through an online search and got a call within 15 minutes from the Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Initially, he found the anti-Semitic rhetoric offensive, thinking it conflicted with the Christian teachings he had grown up with. Well, yes.

And yet, Parker said, "Within six months, I was head over heels. I was looking through my Bible just to put down Jewish people." He attended his first Klan rally in May 2012, only a few months after his first contact. Soon, he had risen to the rank of grand dragon, which is a reward for recruiting other members.

Conversion was not always this expeditious. Back in the 1980s, it took months, sometimes years, for someone to be radicalized. People had to go through the mail to order books and material promoting racist beliefs; and look for physical places to meet in person. Now, a person can do a Google search, and binge on white nationalism through YouTube videos and online forums.

Once in the KKK, Parker was further indoctrinated through weekly “Klan class,” a Bible study that used Scripture to advance racist beliefs. Additionally, there was a Klan website and chat room. Yet, after four years with the KKK, Parker broke away from the organization. –

Not because he had renounced racist beliefs, no.

It was because of a woman. A woman, who is now his fiancée, whom he’d met... at a cross-burning. The Klan disapproved of the woman, because she associated with black people. After that, Parker left the Klan. He said: “That’s how I became a Nazi,” affiliated with the National Socialist Movement.

And he couldn’t wait to get to Unite the Right in Charlottesville.

How on Earth does radicalization happen? Arie Kruglanski, a social psychologist at the University of Maryland, has studied extremists around the world. The driving dynamic comprises the three N’s: need, narrative and network.

The “need” is a basic human “quest to matter, to be somebody, to have respect,” Kruglanski said. In some cases, that need for significance leads people to good deeds. In others, it leads to violent means. The deciding factor is the narrative to which they are exposed.

From Kruglanski’s research, the way people behave correlates with influence of a positive or negative narrative. “If the narrative that you’re exposed to demonstrates that the way to become significant is by contributing to society and helping others, then you would follow that particular course of action,” Kruglanski said. “However, if you’re exposed to a narrative that tells you the way to do it is through violence, through fighting the enemy of your group, or the enemy of your culture, then that is what you are going to do.”

The third “N” refers to network – the community that rewards behavior and dispenses admiration, praise and recognition.⁷

Another explanation for radicalization and totally awful behavior comes from Molly Baskette, who referred to “Extinction Behavior” in a recent Daily Devotional. Baskette hopefully imagines: “the uptick in openly racist, misogynistic, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic behaviors in public and out loud is extinction behavior, which is an increase in

negative behavior just before it disappears. She says that it could be a last flirtation with a firmly-engrained bad habit, “a fool returning to his folly. Perhaps, the fact that things are getting worse means that we are finally coming into a dawning understanding of God's best hopes for Her growing-up children.”

“Our Mama God clearly set the terms for spiritual maturity in the words of Jesus: ‘Love your neighbor. Welcome the stranger. Give all your money to the poor.’ God is supporting us in growing up, and into the next age and stage: an age of dignity, respect, rights, equality and justice for every child of God.”⁸

Let’s return to Ken Parker. The Charlottesville rally marked a turning point for him—through a chance encounter with Deeyah Khan, a British-Norwegian female Muslim filmmaker, who had been targeted by racists. Khan had gone to Charlottesville to try to understand what drove people into hate groups.

What Khan found there were “broken men” who were afraid – afraid of being marginalized by women and minorities, of being emasculated, of their own trauma and weakness. She found Ken Parker. Khan followed him to his home in Jacksonville, Florida. Khan ran her camera, while Parker made flyers with anti-Jewish slogans and swastikas that he tossed into front yards. Boastful and arrogant at first, Parker’s anxiety grew, as Khan questioned him about his actions. Khan read aloud samples of racist e-mails she had received. Ken Parker listened.

In her Netflix documentary, “White Right: Meeting the Enemy,” Khan narrates, “Ken is exactly the kind of person I’ve always been afraid of.” Khan, who said she “had previously tried to combat fascism with angry demonstrations and in-your-face retorts, described her kindness approach as a necessary way to retain her own humanity.”

Khan’s compassion and respect were revelatory to Ken Parker.

On the last day of filming, Parker surprised Khan, who was the first Muslim person he had ever spent time with, by referring to her as a friend. So what? She challenged him: “What does this change? What is this going to do for you moving forward?”

What Parker did was watch Khan's documentary over and over. By the fifth or sixth viewing, he saw himself and the National Socialist Movement with new eyes. "We all look so stupid. This is foolish." Changing the network; changing the narrative.

Shortly after that, Parker and his fiancée struck up a conversation with a neighbor – the pastor of an African-American church. Like Khan, the neighbor treated the couple with kindness, inviting them to Sunday service. They became regulars at the All Saints Holiness Church, where they were welcomed by the African-American congregation. Changing the network; changing the narrative.

Initially, the pull of the brotherhood of the National Socialist Movement held him; and he couldn't let it go. He continued with plans to go to a rally in Georgia. Then, the night before the rally, he prayed to the Holy Spirit for guidance – and decided against attending. Instead, he sent a resignation e-mail to the National Socialist Movement. Parker's need had changed, because of his new network, his new caring community.

Just as Parker's journey into the KKK and the NSM illustrates the pull of hate groups, his path out shows how extremists can be deradicalized. That counter-narrative must come not only from friends, but also from public officials and political leaders.

Almost a year after he marched as a neo-Nazi in Charlottesville, a few days before Parker began the process of having his white supremacist tattoos removed, he was baptized in All Saints Holiness Church. Ken Parker walked hand-in-hand with his black pastor into the Atlantic Ocean, dipped his head under the water and rose into a new life.

Love wins.

¹ "Open My Eyes, That I May See." Clara H. Scott, 1895. # 451 *Glory to God Hymnal*.

² "Exegetical Notes," http://www.ucc.org/worship_worship-ways 11/25/2018

³ <https://thinkprogress.org/clergy-in-charlottesville-e95752415c3e/>

⁴ #LoveResists #CVilleClergyCall <pic.twitter.com/y1XFwqO2mH>

⁵ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/8/14/16140506/congregate-cville-charlottesville-rally-protest-interview>

⁶ www.ucc.org/news_ucc_clergy_answering_the_call_to_oppose_alt_right_rally_in_virginia

^{7,9} <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/11/01/hate-group-white-extremist-radicalization/1847255002/>

⁸ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_extinction_behavior

