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Pastoral Letter on Racism and Social Injustice June 3, 2020

It has weighed heavily on my heart that as a pastor and proclaimer of the Good News of Jesus Christ, I have a responsibility to speak to you on this current climate of racial injustice, as once again evidenced in the recent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police authorities, and the many responses to those acts that we are witnessing in our nation, and indeed around the world.

I had an initial post on my personal Face Book page where I could only reflect at the time using the words of others, because I couldn't find anything which I could say that wouldn't sound like a platitude. Since then I have witnessed others' writings and the powerful sermon of one of my colleagues, the Rev. Tamika Jancewicz, whose message is on our synod's site. (I can send a written copy to those who are interested.)

I didn't preach this past Sunday because we had prepared a service for the Day of Pentecost that used the reflections of the members of our LEAD team about the gifts and characteristics of the Holy Spirit. This coming Sunday, the feast of the Holy Trinity, I am taking a Sunday off and directing everyone to the DE-MD Synod worship which will feature a sermon from our presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. I expect it will be powerful as well. If you want to know more of the ELCA's thinking on these issues, go to elca.org for the social statements on Race, Ethnicity, and Culture, and the Church and Criminal Justice.

A parent of one of our school students asked what our stand was on racism and injustice. Our principal, Jennifer John, offered a statement based on the positive values about human worth and identity that we hold, and teach, as a church and school. Not only do I concur with and support her statement, I found it very meaningful and faithful; I hope you can find it on our various social media, including the Face Book page for St. Peter's Elementary School.

For my part, I find it to be a characteristic of mine that it takes some time for me to process my thoughts. And honestly, my history and background was in a community where our 'segregation' was an unspoken, circumstantial condition. There were not regulations or overt understandings that people were kept out; it just seemed to be the way it was. When my 40th high school reunion came around, I looked at the pictures of my classmates and could count on two hands the number of black or brown persons among our nearly 800 seniors. And I still feel somewhat sheltered from today's diversity, and so it feels disconcerting for me to be speaking about this issue.

The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police officers are wrong and unjust, and those involved should be prosecuted in a fair and open hearing. Many other crimes against minority persons have been catalogued in other venues, and I trust you have heard and tried to understand these concerns of all persons of color. For this last week we have seen an unprecedented gathering of peoples of many races and backgrounds to peacefully protest these injustices. I have attended previous demonstrations in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Given a safe way to do so during this pandemic, I would raise my voice again. My spouse, Pr. Sandra Carlson Alexis, will attend a prayer service this evening with many faith leaders of our city. Together this past Monday we offered to our faith communities prayers for this time of national mourning over the coronavirus pandemic and issues of racial injustice which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had called for on June 1.

It is our constitutional right to think and speak freely, and to peaceably assemble in order to promote and defend our opinions and beliefs. Among the tens of thousands of people gathering to do so, the amount of violent acts against property or persons done by those in public areas of our cities appears to be small in comparison. I do not believe in violence as a means for political or social change, and deplore those who practice it, and especially those who have used the demonstrations to commit property crimes. Yet we also must put a check on those in city, state, or federal authority who act in such a manner, or encourage others to do so. I have personal opinions about those elected to high office in our nation, but it is not appropriate to share those in this reflection, and certainly not from the pulpit. The crisis is much larger than our individual assessments of those involved in leadership today.

Our nation has a long history of civil rights abuse against Americans of African and Asian descent, Latin Americans, and Native Americans. Dr Martin Luther King had paraphrased a former abolitionist, Rev Theodore Parker, when he stated, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Our recent history has never seen so many distinct crises as in this time and place: the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting employment and economic collapse, the large, and predominantly peaceful, response to the killing of unarmed black citizens and the reactions to these demonstrations, and our worsening climate and environmental atmosphere. All these convergences of disaster, when stated directly, greatly frightens me.

As a person of faith, I know where our recourse is found— the love of God and neighbor. As a citizen of this world, I have some doubts about the human ability to effect real change. Yes, things around us have changed rapidly over the last several decades, but even when we read the Bible, we see that humanity’s character has not seemed to grow more ethical and responsible to the common good of society. Greed and corruption also seem to have become more prevalent than ever. And just when we would try to be united as a body of believers, it is unsafe to gather in person. But because we **can** communicate in so many ways, let us continue to do so. In this statement, I have tried to express both personal thoughts and reflections as a faithful Christian witness and a citizen of this country that I love. There is a wealth of Scripture that I could quote in all these thoughts, yet I’ll share only this one from Romans 13:8-10,

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

I heard this long ago from a hero of mine: “love is the answer.” I believe that it is, and will always be, enough, because it is who and what God is for us.

Pax, *Pastor Lans*