

## From the Bishop

### An Invitation to Work Together for Racial Justice

June 15, 2020

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Ephesians 2:13-16

Last fall, before COVID-19 kept us from traveling, I visited Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. After two days of visiting with students, meeting with faculty, and sitting in on classes, it was time to go home. A pastor offered to drive me to the airport, and I gratefully accepted his offer. I was tired of being in a suit and clergy collar, so I took my collar off, and packed my suit jacket into my carryon luggage. I said sheepishly to the pastor that I wanted to open my collar for the flight home, even though that meant people wouldn't realize they were sitting with a clergyman. He replied that he always wore his collar when he travelled. I said, "You're a better man than I," to which he replied, "that's not why I wear it. I wear it because I'm a black man. When I don't wear it, I get pulled over by TSA. But when I wear it, I usually am allowed to pass through." And I said to him, "You live a very different life than I do." As he drove, he told me about that life, about how he has learned to be cautious when stopped by police, how he and his wife (who is white) get treated when they go out together, about a pattern of discrimination that he faces daily. He was not complaining. He was telling me about his life. And I learned again, not for the first time, that I was born with an advantage that others do not have, an advantage that comes from having white skin.

I have other stories of coming to that realization. When I was in the first class for my Doctoral degree, our cohort of ten sat in a circle. The final person to arrive in class was a woman of African descent. She looked at the only open chair and said to the class "Would someone please change places with me? I'm an African American woman and I never sit with my back to an open door." I remember

thinking that it would never have occurred to me to be concerned about sitting in that seat. I was once told by a Latino colleague that his parents always made sure he was well dressed when he went to school because they didn't want him to be called out for being "dirty." I was told by another colleague, an African descent woman, that she was thanked at a multi-synod event for a presentation given by another African descent woman who didn't particularly look like her. These are things most of us have never experienced. I have never had to worry about where I sat in class, or about being called "dirty," or being confused with some other short, dark-haired preacher, at least not to the extent that these colleagues were. Again, this comes from what is called "white privilege."

I have talked to many people who reject the concept of "white privilege." They claim, rightly so, that they have worked hard for all they have earned, and that their lives have not been easy. White privilege does not mean that white people live easy lives with no struggles. A good definition of white privilege comes from Francis E. Kendell, quoted in this article by Cory Collins: White privilege is "having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do." White privilege allows me, through no merit of my own, to walk through a TSA checkpoint with little fear of being stopped, while my African descent colleague needs to wear a clergy collar to get the same treatment.

Such privilege is based on systemic racism, which allows us unconsciously to accept it as normal when white people are treated with respect and people of color are treated with suspicion. Such racism is deadly for people of color, as illustrated in the death of George Floyd which has shocked the nation. It is easy to blame killings like his on a few bad apples, some racist cops who are completely unlike the rest of us. But the problem of suspecting people of color more than white people is not the problem of a few unenlightened folks. It is a problem in all of society. There is no reason my African descent colleague should be treated any differently than me. And yet he is.

It is the nature of sinful human beings to suspect people who are different, who are "other" than we are, to be less worthy of the privileges we have for ourselves. For example, the Greeks had a word for anyone who was not Greek. The Greek word for non-Greeks is a word we know in English: "barbarians." You know how that term is used now. The dictionary defines a barbarian as "a person in a savage, primitive state" or "a person without culture, refinement, or education." But originally, "barbarian" just meant "outsider," someone who is not one of us.

Jesus lived in a culture where there were insiders and outsiders. The insiders were the people of Israel. Anyone who was not was a Gentile, an outsider, not

“one of us.” But when Christ died and rose again, Jesus did so to make all people one with God. After Jesus’ ascension, God sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day. That Spirit allowed people to confess their sins and to realize that to continue to treat Gentiles as outsiders was not in keeping with what God wanted. As the verse from Ephesians quoted above reminds us, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Again and again, the early church had to confess their sin of trying to keep the Gentiles out, trying to maintain a privilege that had been done away with by Christ’s cross and resurrection. Again and again, they had to repent and change their ways of worship, of thought, of life itself, in order to be one with the Gentiles who, like them, were also beloved children of God.

Good people of the Pacifica Synod, this is work we also have to do. We are called to repent, not just once but again and again, of the sin of racism, which so infects our lives and thoughts. We are called to action, to change our ways of worship, of thought, of life itself, in order to be one with our siblings of color who, like us, are beloved children of God. As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton said in her sermon for Trinity Sunday, “Until the white majority feels within our soul that the pain and suffering of black and brown people is our own pain and suffering, it will not be safe to be black or brown in America.” Our work is to accept this pain as our pain, and to act to change ourselves and our society. By doing this, we participate in God’s work of healing the racial divide in our nation. By doing this, we participate in God’s work of breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between us.

We in the Pacifica Synod are committed to providing resources to guide this work. Our Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group is currently curating resources and they will be added to the Pacifica Synod website. If you would like to share a resource that has been helpful for your congregation or recommend an organization doing racial justice work in your local community that your congregation is partnering with, please send an email to Pastor Lara Martin at [pastorlaramartin@gmail.com](mailto:pastorlaramartin@gmail.com). We seek resources for children, Confirmation, youth groups, young adults, inter=generational Bible studies, women’s groups, men’s studies, etc. As we receive resources and partnering organizations, we will post them on our website at [www.pacificasynod.org](http://www.pacificasynod.org).

Our Churchwide offices also have resources. I encourage you to take time on June 17, this coming Wednesday, to participate in the worship service in

commemoration of the Emanuel Nine. The worship service will be streamed live at 9 am Pacific Daylight Time, 6 am Hawai'i Standard Time here and will be available after that on the ELCA's YouTube channel. The Emanuel Nine were nine African Americans who were meeting for Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015, when they were killed by a young white supremacist. Two of the participants were taking classes at Lutheran Southern Seminary, our ELCA seminary in Charleston. The young white supremacist had been confirmed in an ELCA congregation. As Bishop Eaton said at the time, "One of ours has killed two of ours." It is a tragedy that the name of the gunman is more widely known than the names of those who were killed. I choose not to name the gunman here, but to honor those who were martyred that day: Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Mrs. Cynthia Graham Hurd, Mrs. Susie J. Jackson, Mrs. Ethel Lee Lance, Rev. DePayne Vontrease Middleton-Doctor, Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, Mr. Tywanza Kibwe Diop Sanders, Rev. Daniel Lee Simmons, Sr., and Mrs. Myra Singleton Quarles Thompson, AME Licentiate.

In response to these killings, to the lingering effects of racism, and to our church's courageous decision not to ignore the history of our complicity in the perpetuation of racism, the ELCA issued an apology to the African Descent community for the sins of racism. This document contains a history of the Lutheran church's response to slavery and discrimination, and calls for a repudiation of racism and white privilege. In order for such repudiation to become a reality, action is needed. Daily repentance is needed.

I hope you will join me in this work. I pray for the day when I never again am asked to change seats with a woman of African descent due to her concern about sitting with her back to an open door. I pray for a day when my siblings of color no longer need to concern themselves any more than their white neighbors with what they or their children wear. I pray for a day when people of color will be seen and recognized for who they are. I pray for a day when my colleagues of color can go through TSA checkpoints the same way I do. I pray for a day African Americans will be no more afraid of police than are white people, as we are both treated as valued members of the community. May God bless us, lead us in repentance, and help us to work for racial justice. May God lead us to that day.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Andy Taylor

Pacifica Synod of the ELCA

Together in Christ we equip, accompany, and serve boldly so all may experience God's boundless grace.