

LETTER TO THE CHURCHES OF THE NEW ENGLAND DISTRICT ON THE RECENT VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

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Racism is a sin. It is a sin against God and Man. It has existed for decade upon decade in America and it does exist today. Its growth and festering have led to these days of protest and violence where we all say, “Was the Coronavirus not enough.... Now this?” But Racism was around a lot longer than Covid 19 has been.

But you knew all this. As Christians we know from God’s Word that He loves “the world” and all peoples. Jesus came to us that all men and women who have been part of His Creation might have that salvation that leads to eternal life. Jesus is for the nations.

But we know this in many ways academically because we did not have to face Racism personally. I am white. I may have the most understanding heart, or hope I do, but I do not know the racism that our African-American, Latino, and brothers and sisters in Christ of other minorities have personally experienced.

I could spend time pointing out to you that racism is an evil and an affront against our Heavenly Father. But as I said I don’t really need to explain that to you... and certainly there exist good men and women who can present that case to you better than I can—and sometimes from their personal experience and the personal lessons of life. So instead I am going to write to you the positives about how much Jesus loves people of every tribe, language, and nation. (Revelation 5:9) These are symbols of our ethnicity (tribe), our unique culture (language) and our political realities (nation). Jesus never calls these things bad per se. But they all came about because sin within the heart of man divides. The tower of Babel in Genesis is a perfect portrait of that reality in action. (Genesis 11)

But Jesus has overcome the barriers that racism creates and still can. He was known and in many cases put down because He did not allow the barriers to stop him from loving, for example, the tax collectors and “sinners”. In one instance of healing the lepers it was a grateful Samaritan who returned to praise and thank Jesus – of all the good relationships created that day it was the one with the Samaritan, the “foreigner” that Jesus noted. (Luke 17:6) He told a parable we call the “Good Samaritan”, not realizing that in Jesus’ day no God-fearing Jew would ever apply the word “good” to such an individual. (Luke 10:33) The woman at the well was a Samaritan, a female who should have respectfully avoided contact with the Rabbi she knew Jesus to be, and who herself had a shady past when it came to relationships. (Joh 4:9) But Jesus overcame those barriers and in the end after staying in that village the people there became the first to identify Jesus as “The Savior of the World” !!!! (John 4:42) When He died He died for all and His “Forgive them” was not restricted to one people and one nation but to us all.

It is why St. Paul could speak of Jesus having broken down the “wall of hostility”. (Ephesians 2:14) You and I often take that remark and entirely make it symbolical and we apply it to our relationship with the heavenly Father. To be sure Jesus did restore us to His Father. But did you know there was a literal wall in the Temple in Jerusalem that was clearly posted with a racist remark on it? The message for all to see ordered that no Gentile cross that barrier upon pain of death. Gentiles (which in the original language is better translated as “the Nations”) were forbidden access to God in the very location where all believed God dwelt. The racism there carried a death sentence with it. But as Paul tells us, Jesus has broken down that “wall of hostility” even as His death tore the curtain in the Temple that symbolically stood as a barrier to God the Father at the Holy of Holies in the Temple. (Matthew 27:51) Paul truly could write because of Jesus

that there was neither “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Galatians 3:28) in the eyes of His Father.

Acts does something further to celebrate the love of Jesus for all races on earth. Just last Sunday on Pentecost we read that passage from Acts about that first Pentecost and the unique presence of the Holy Spirit among the Lord’s own. (Acts 2) We hear that lengthy list of nations represented in Jerusalem that day with names we humorously struggle to pronounce. (Acts 2: 8-11) But have you ever looked at the locations of those nations present that day in their geographic relationship to Jerusalem? If you start at Jerusalem and go outward toward each nation you result in a diagram that looks like a bicycle wheel with Jerusalem at the center. Each nation is in a different direction from the place where the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to be Jesus’ witnesses. Put them all together and you cover every direction as the Gospel moves outward “to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) As we conjecture from history, Thomas the disciple even made it to India with the Gospel message; and others took it as missionaries even further outward through the centuries.

That is why on the last day as the host of the redeemed stream into the NEW Jerusalem it will include peoples from every tribe, nation, and language. (Revelation 1:9) The uniqueness of who we are as peoples of creation will be maintained in the New Creation; but the hatred of racism among the peoples of creation will be gone. In Revelation we even read in that beautiful portrait that reminds us of a renewed Eden that on the trees there will be leaves and the leaves are for the “healing of the nations”. (Revelation 22:2)

We long for this day. But we also know because of Pentecost that Jesus is not just waiting there for us to arrive. He is among us now with His healing. (Matthew 28:20) So I ask you as His people in these days when racism has erupted in violence and darkness the following:

1. Forgive as you have been forgiven. If you were the victim of racism break the cycle of hatred by forgiving from the heart as Jesus has. If you brought the sin of hatred from your own heart against another ask the Father above to forgive you for Jesus’ sake and to put a “new and right spirit within you.” (Psalm 51)
2. Do not give in to racist thoughts when they tempt your own heart. Do not hate the men and women Jesus loves even when it seems they are pouring out hatred upon you or upon the world where you live. Ask Jesus for His eyesight that sees all people through the cross and the resurrection. Every rule of reconciliation and the reaching of peace starts not with blaming the other but with examining our own hearts.
3. Pray- you’ve probably been doing that a lot with the pandemic. Pray for those who have been hurt in the past from racism and pray for those who hurt others now and those who experience their violence in these current days.
4. Seek Justice. As Lutherans we do not always find ourselves in the forefront of the cry for social justice. But as we live the life of the saved (in which we by grace find ourselves deeply immersed as Lutherans – thank you, Jesus!) ==also lend your voice to the cry for justice. In our national pledge is a quest for liberty AND JUSTICE for all. Seeking justice as God’s people is in the Bible too! (Isaiah 1:17)
5. Make your church to be a welcoming church to all races. Sure, we have our signs out there saying “All are welcome”. But in the end most of our congregations in the LCMS are Germanic in nature with members whose ancestors came to America primarily from one ethnic region of Europe. My own grandparents who ended up as members of Trinity Lutheran Church in Clinton, Massachusetts, fit that description. So ask the hard questions about whether your own church has put up barriers to

the peoples and the nations who do not have that same racial ancestry as most on the membership rolls.

6. Lead by contacting your elected officials, a right given us by a gracious God, to tell them that because you are a person of faith that racism should find no place in America.
7. Welcome the immigrant. They are still coming to our shores- just not from the same places Grandpa and Gramma did. They are coming from Asia and Africa and Latin America. We can and should follow and encourage legal paths when it comes to immigration. But these immigrants are often those similar to the ones coming from the Middle East who have nothing and have left empty destroyed lives behind them in a destroyed homeland of theirs (as many German immigrants came to America once after two World Wars.) Welcome them without judgment.
8. Support Missions – Right now, with the pandemic, generosity is a dear commodity to have and to give. But remember those who bring the Gospel to those without Jesus – both overseas and locally. You may even want to visit one of our ethnic worshiping communities here in New England on a Sunday to join Ethiopian believers, Eritrean believers, Brazilian believers, Chinese believers, Liberian believers. (I undoubtedly left out some, forgive me.) Did you know that each of these tribes and peoples and languages have a presence in our District? I realize that such a statement is in itself couched in racist language. But we can applaud and join with those who in their differences from us are just as much “church” as we are in Jesus Christ. They are “us” !!

Keep the faith, Saints of God. Thank the Lord when you are spared disease and violence in your life. Pray for those the Lord allows to suffer as He suffered violence from others and took our “sins and diseases” (see Psalm 103:3) upon Himself on that cross. Unlike all other gods, the One we love understands pain on a personal level – pain endured for us. Offer the hope the world cannot give – the hope of the Resurrection and the Hope of God’s presence with us now. We often say “We’re in this together”. That togetherness includes Jesus Christ.

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