

June 5, 2020

The peace of Christ be with you!

Even though evil's tragic history is well known, recent violent events in Georgia, Kentucky, and Minnesota have once again brought to everyone's eye what has been and remains the inescapable reality for people of color in our nation. While it could be argued that Ferguson or Charlottesville or Charleston (as well as the many other names and places from our past) should have been enough to move us to commit to a thorough dismantling of the systemic racism that consumes us, we see once more how our failure to act in lasting ways creates yet more suffering.

In recent days, we have been forced to make sense of the images we cannot un-see, and the words that we cannot un-hear. And yet, this act of seeing and hearing the pain our siblings of color cannot avoid compels us to consider how our action or inaction may have contributed to the chaos that continues to unfold.

The marked resurgence of the kinds of hatred and violence that we can no longer ignore, coupled with the support given to them by both religious and political voices, compels us to offer a counter word—a word grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Recent rhetoric and actions display the same dehumanizing hate that has arisen before. We've seen it in events like the Holocaust, but we've also witnessed it in our nation's sinful practice of slavery. We continue to experience the pernicious ways that shameful part of our past taints our relationships to this day.

But make no mistake. This violence and hatred so prevalent today are as sinful now as they have always been. Our congregation's history reveals how those who were part of our congregation during the Civil War were not immune to the struggle surrounding slavery. We are grateful for the faithful voices in our congregation's past who unequivocally stood for justice and freedom. Even more, we hear how their witness in their day speaks to us in ours.

That is why we affirm without reservation: Racism, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and bigotry of any kind are evil.

But as writer David Dark reminds us, “The denunciation of hatred is the easiest and most meaningless denunciation” you can make. Denunciation without loving action is nothing more than a clanging cymbal in a world already filled with sound.

And therein lies our failure. We have been slow to recognize the ways the “principalities and powers” keep us tethered to systems we believe can never be changed. We repent of that despair and commit to the work we need to do in our lives, a work birthed in and shaped by our faith. We hope that you will join us in that commitment.

As Christians, we promise in baptism “to reject evil and its powers in the world which defy God’s righteousness and love.”

At times, we will reject evil with our words and with our prayers.

At other times, we realize that we are to reject evil not only by what we say, but by what we do—with our actions. This is especially true when we act in ways to honor and protect our neighbors who become the targets of hate, whether isolated in a single event or systemically.

We recognize that hate’s history is long, and that its invasiveness threatens our survival. And yet, we place our hope in what God is doing even now to make all things new.

That’s why we write to you today. We seek to offer you guidance from our shared faith, as well as to let you know that we are developing a way for you to join us in our commitment to do the work God calls us to undertake.

In the very near future, we will share a link to a new page on our church website that will not only provide a host of excellent resources available to us, but also invite you to join the challenge to overcome systemic racism with us. We also anticipate sharing ways for you to connect through current long-standing congregational commitments like the Black Church Coalition or BUILD. It is our hope that you will find ways to act in your life, as well as join the cooperative partnerships that exist now, or will come to fruition in the future.

But now, we wish to remind you of what God's Spirit has already given us strength and courage to do. We are mindful of some words from the Confession of 1967: "In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act."

We believe this is one of those moments that calls for discernment and for action.

The Confession of 1967 also counsels what we are to do in moments like this: "The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations."

We are called to pray, and we are called to act. And we seek to cloak both our words and our actions in the kind of love we see in the way of Jesus Christ.

We pray for the family and friends of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, as well as for law enforcement officers who have been injured during the recent protests. We are particularly grateful for people we know personally who serve with dignity and honor as officers within our community, and we pray for them and their families.

We pray for the ones who were hurt physically or spiritually during protests that have been coopted by many forces. While there is no question that people are more valuable than property, we also recognize the ways looting and destruction make the renewal of the community much more difficult.

We pray for those who for generations have suffered the bigotry we have the ability to overlook. We confess that what has shocked us in recent days has been an all-too-common threat for our sisters and brothers of color for generations. As Emi Mahmoud, a refugee poet from Darfur, writes, "I never wear shoes I can't run in."

For that reason, prayer also means that we seek to understand the experiences of the hated. Prayer means that we strive to name the things that make our prayers necessary, including the causes of racism and the need to repent in order to lance its wounds so that all may flourish both in the church and in the communities in which we serve.

We pray for our local, national, and global religious and civic leaders. We pray that they would act in ways that honor the dignity and equality of all people. And we give thanks to God and to our leaders for the good they do, even as we call them to do better when they fail.

And as difficult as it is, we pray for the ones who see violence and hatred as their only tools to build the world they seek. We pray God would soften their hearts and open their eyes to better ways to live as part of the larger community.

Above all, we commit to pray with love.

The love of which we write is not about simple affection. It is about principle—about extending dignity and respect to every person because every human being bears the image of God. That remains true even when the actions of others corrupts that image in them, or when our sinfulness distorts our ability to see the image of God in the other.

But love is no stranger to anger. In fact, love for the other rightfully creates anger when we see what too many people are forced to endure. In that way, our anger serves as an impetus to act.

But anger must not become our stopping place. It is rather a springboard toward loving action, and we affirm without reservation that steadfast, vulnerable love alone is the lasting response to hate.

At the close of worship each Sunday, even in these days of pandemic distancing, we remind one another that God sends us into the world that God loves to serve as agents of the grace we have received. It's a way of remembering that Christians are people who don't simply go into the world, but rather we are sent.

Hal Warheim, one of Pastor John's seminary professors, once shared a blessing that reminds us of what we take with us as we go in response to God's sending:

Because the world is poor and starving, go with bread.

Because the world is filled with fear, go with courage.

Because the world is in despair, go with hope.

Because the world is living lies, go with truth.

Because the world is sick with sorrow, go with joy.

Because the world is weary of war, go with peace.

Because the world is seldom fair, go with justice.

*Because the world is under judgment, go with mercy.
Because the world will die without it, go with love.*

Because the world will die without it, we go with love.

Blessings and deep peace,

[Pastor John P. Leggett](#)

[Pastor Sara Benedetti](#)

[Pastor David Holden](#)

P.S. Please watch for your invitation to engage with the resources we are now developing. We hope you'll join us in whatever work God is calling you to undertake.