



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP  
NEW JERSEY SYNOD  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
*God's work. Our hands.*  
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

June 2, 2020

Dear Friends,

I am weary and my heart is heavy. I look around our state, our country, and our world to see we are unsettled by many things. COVID19 has kept us from our regular routines for many weeks, including gathering for in person church activities. We have lost over 100,000 people to this virus (over 11,500 people have died in NJ alone). Unemployment has skyrocketed and lines at food distribution sites have grown exponentially. Justified anger over the murder of Mr. George Floyd has given rise to demonstrations calling for dismantling racist systems. In the wake of these protests, people seeking opportunity to wreak havoc on communities have destroyed businesses through vandalism and looting. There is much to grieve right now.

While our efforts to change the causes of our distress may seem small, we can respond and act in ways that positively contribute to the common good. We can begin by praying for and with each other – for those who are sick, unemployed, grieving, and oppressed; for those in medical professions, first line responders, police officers, and community organizers; for parents, grandparents, teachers, and caregivers; for those against whom we harbor hatred and for those we love; for those in national, state, and local governments; for all whom Christ died; for peace.

I am increasingly concerned about the ways we have divided ourselves over these issues. At a time when we need to come together, we are instead coming apart. Recommendations about how best to contain the spread of COVID19 are followed or challenged along partisan political lines. We are seeing an easing of restrictions in NJ which means local decisions about indoor, in-person worship will need to be made thoughtfully based on what is most advisable for your context (your building, population, capacity for safety measures).

Similarly, reactions in the aftermath of Mr. Floyd's death have given rise to false dichotomies – either you work toward eradicating racism or you support law enforcement personnel; either you support the protests or you denounce vandalism and destruction. As Lutheran Christians, we live in the tension of an “either/or” world with a “both/and” response all the time. We are both saint and sinner at the same time. We need both law and gospel in our proclamation. So it is that we can work toward eradicating racism and support the vocation of police officers. We can support protests for justice and denounce the destruction of local businesses.

In an ELCA Social Message on Community Violence, we read:

“According to Lutheran theology, society is to be ruled by the civil use of the Law. Government is responsible under God for the protection of its citizens and the maintenance of justice and public order.<sup>1</sup> Just laws and their proper enforcement by police and courts are necessary to restrain violence. But laws and their enforcement are often corrupted by sin. As citizens in a democracy, we have the responsibility to join with others to hold government accountable for protecting society and ensuring justice for all, and to seek changes in policies and practices toward these ends.”

Holding these seemingly opposite actions together requires work on our part – building relationships with each other across what’s comfortable. And that is only possible because God first established a relationship with us in our baptism. Connected through the life-giving waters of baptism, we can listen to our siblings in Christ who cry out for justice and those called to carry out that justice. Bathed in the same waters of life, we can join those who march for change and echo the words of Mr. Terrence Floyd (George Floyd’s younger brother) to stop tearing up the community<sup>2</sup>. As one family in Christ, we can come together even as we hold differing opinions on how to live out our faith.

Indeed, there is much to grieve right now: death, sickness, injustice, prejudice, violence – all cause tears to flow down our faces. But we grieve trusting God will wipe away our tears and make all things new. I pray for that day to come soon. In the meantime, I invite you to join me in witnessing to our faith by:

- Praying with our synod at noon every day.
- Working for justice and peace in all the earth by engaging your congregation in some form of anti-racism education through a bible study, a small-group dialogue, or a book club. See the list of resources on our website.
- Loving all people following the example of our Lord, Jesus Christ – especially those most difficult to love.
- Recognizing those who carry out their vocation to serve and protect their communities with integrity while working with them to demand transformation of unjust systems.
- Thanking essential workers who haven’t been able to stay at home, including healthcare professionals, delivery and postal workers, janitorial staff, trash collectors, and restaurant employees.

Thank you for being God’s hands and heart at work in the world!

Your sister in Christ,



Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession

<sup>2</sup> As heard on Good Morning America, June 1, 2020.