



June 10, 2020

Dear members and friends of Resurrection Lutheran Church,

The gospel of Christ compels us to write to you with a simple message: ***black lives matter***.

Those three words entered our national vocabulary as a simple statement following the shooting death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012. That statement became the name of a movement that continues, because violence against black and brown bodies, including violence perpetrated by those sworn to serve and protect, continues as a tragic fact of our national life. For those of us who live and move in white-centered spaces, such violence is too easily forgotten, but it takes intentional effort to turn away from the recent deaths of **Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd**.

As followers of Jesus, we must not continue to turn away from the racial injustice that has plagued our land for 400 years. We must affirm with word and action that black lives matter. Injustice hardly begins to describe our history: women, children, and men kidnapped and brought across an ocean; families ripped apart and generations enslaved; black bodies, made in the image of God, raped and beaten beyond recognition; after slavery, the terror of lynching, legalized oppression through the Jim Crow system, and deliberate, careful efforts, such as red-lining neighborhoods, to keep black and brown families from building wealth. In our own time, the criminal justice system incarcerates African Americans at five times the rate of whites (according to the NAACP), and one in every 1,000 black men will die at the hands of law enforcement (according to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) — a peer-reviewed academic journal). Throughout American history, our policies have denied that black lives matter as much as white lives, and that must change.

No compassionate human being should stand by in the face of such brutal oppression, but those of us who find God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth should be among the loudest voices crying out for justice. In his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, the late black theologian James H. Cone writes powerfully about the silence and sometimes overt support of white Christians regarding violence against blacks, saying, "There [is] no way a community could support or ignore lynching in America, while still representing in word and deed the one who was lynched by Rome." Lynching still happens in America in both a literal and figurative sense. Many have said in recent weeks that our actions here and now reveal what we would have done in various times of oppression and resistance we have read about in history. Our actions here and now reveal how we act in the face of the cross.

What then shall we do? We must listen to black voices when they tell us what it is like to be black in America. We must learn about the history and present reality of racist policies in our

nation and advocate for anti-racist policies. We must support minority-led organizations striving for justice and anti-racist policies with whatever we have to offer, including our money. If we do these things, it will be impossible for those of us who are white to escape our own complicity in white supremacy and the reality of our own racist attitudes. Learning will lead to repentance which will lead to action which will lead to more learning, more repentance, and more action.

In the near future, we invite you to gather at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, June 17, either in person outdoors at the church or online, for Evening Prayer Commemorating the Emanuel Nine, who died in a racially motivated, mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC on June 17, 2015. This is now an annual commemoration on the calendar of the ELCA.

This letter should have come sooner. As a church, we should have acted long ago to address the racial injustice all around us. We have delayed because these conversations make us uncomfortable, and we have delayed because we want to “get it right.” White privilege makes these delays possible, as our lives remain insulated from the impact of such oppression. Moving forward, we must learn to live with our discomfort. We must not be afraid to make mistakes, and we must be willing to accept correction with humility. This is the least we can do for the sake of our black and brown siblings, some of whom are members of this congregation.

Enclosed with this letter you will find a list of resources to use in your own learning. We commit to developing faith formation opportunities centered on racial justice, and we will bring recommendations to the Congregation Council regarding further action and organizations we might partner with in the community to advance anti-racist policy and action. We welcome your suggestions and conversation at this moment where our faith calls us to speak and to act.

In April 1963, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. penned his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” to white clergy who criticized his actions against injustice in that city. We commend to you the entire letter, which you can find easily online, but leave you here with one powerful excerpt, where Dr. King reminds us what the church has been and can be.

There was a time when the church was very powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. ... Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent – and often even vocal – sanction of things as they are.

May God give us a strong voice with a certain sound that cries out for justice, and may our freedom in Christ drive us to seek freedom for all.

With gratitude for our shared witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ,

Pastor Ryan Bailey

Pastor Mitch Phillips