

Video #9

Together Here Anti-Racism TEAM

Bishop Aitken

Greetings dear Synod:

I bring you encouragement and challenge today in this particularly unsettling, but absolutely vital time in our lives as the Body of Christ in this Synod. As I said in last week's video, I believe it is a **Kairos** time, a time we cannot afford to ignore or remain idle in.

1) We are dealing with deep seated, relentless, evil and oppressive systemic racism, against our Native American and black and brown sisters and brothers in this country. I name this as sin. The rightful high profile protesting against Racism and White Supremacy may have been ignited by media coverage of the most recent victims of racism, but it has been going on 1) in our lives, 2) in the Christian church, 3) in our own Lutheran Denomination and in our Synod, 4) as well as in our country and world.

Back in 2016, our Church, the ELCA condemned the so called "Doctrine of Discovery," which is the White Supremacist *written* version of racism, deriving historically from both the State and the Church, which described white people as infinitely superior to all other people. It was used to justify the 1) the enslavement of the indigenous people who were first here in the land, 2) their forced 3) the stealing the land they lived on 5) the encouragement to demean American Indian's dignity, 6) the separation of Indian children from parents by sending them to Boarding Schools to erase their traditions 7) and the justification for killing American Indians not only of God, but of our Savior, Christ himself. Racism, white supremacy, and violence became the un-holy "Trinity" invoked to justify this carnage against our beautiful Native American neighbors. I need to own that. We need to own that.

In 2017, our own synod, the Northeastern Minnesota Synod, put further flesh on the original Repudiation Resolution, and it is called, R-17-1 with a Bridge Building Task Force.

Responsibilities of the Bridge Building Task Force as written in Resolution 17-1:

- 1-identify an appropriate ELCA synodical ceremony of repentance and reconciliation with tribal leaders,
- 2-provide resources for similar congregational observances with local tribal leaders, for times and places as are appropriate;
- 3-develop resources with the ELCA, **and** with Native communities to help congregations understand and reduce the negative consequences of the "doctrine of discovery" for Native people in Northern Minnesota;
- 4-support a renewed strategy for ministry/ partnership with Native communities within the synod territory, with long-term funding
- 5-Fund and use 1-resources, 2-educational opportunities, and 3- initiatives so that the Northeastern MN Synod will build bridges over the cultural divide between native and nonnatives in our congregations and communities
- 6-meet regularly, and report to the Synod Council quarterly and the Synod Assembly annually, regarding the task force's efforts to build upon the above commitments"

TOGETHER HERE

Our Synod followed up on that Resolution (R17-1) and formed "Together Here" ministry, which has been working in and through our Synod through the leadership of Northeastern Minnesota Deacon Candidate Colleen Bernu, a governing board, and committed team members with respect to our particular context here in Northeastern Minnesota.

In our area - racism is overwhelmingly our racist beliefs and actions towards our Native American sisters and brothers who make up the vast majority of non-white people in the territory of our synod. There are five federally recognized Indian Reservations in our synod. Let me name them:

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| 1-Grand Portage Chippewa, | 4- Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, |
| 2-Fond du Lac band of Lake Superior Chippewa, | 5- Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe, |
| 3-Leech Lake band of Ojibwe | |

Growing up in South Minneapolis I remember riding along in a station wagon with other boy scouts and our Scout Leader through a section of the city where many American Indians lived. Everyone in that car had memorized the *Scout Law*. We were proud of it and it was the framework for our life together as Scouts. There are 12 points: A scout is: Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, Friendly, courteous, kind, Obedient, cheerful, thrifty brave, clean and reverent. I've never forgotten these 12 Laws. And yet, in the back of that station wagon, there were extremely ugly and derogatory comments from non-other than my own Senior Patrol member who was supposed to be the chosen older boy leader we were to follow. His words were absolutely degrading about "Indians" living in our city. There was laughter and support from inside the car, but the dad driving said nothing. It was only later, when our Scoutmaster heard about it he called together a special meeting of our entire troop, including each scout and each father of a scout. The air was heavy with seriousness. A pointed and heavy conversation took place about racism and how it went against the 12 Scout Laws. I'm grateful for that wise Scoutmaster's leadership and I will never forget the sternness in his voice, the passion in his voice in the clear condemnation of what happened in that car. In the church, we would call this the work of God's Law, cutting clear to the center of sin. Do you see how the "system" – even such a well-meaning "system" as the Boy Scout Law, had been infected by an alien, disgusting and vile flavor had infiltrated?

I tell you this story to point to a bigger story; something even more important than the honorable 12 Scout Laws: namely Jesus, our Lord and Master as the Scriptures say, and our baptism into Jesus' life. Jesus Christ, the Gospel we preach about each week, and the faith we hold dear enough to go to Bible studies to learn more about, actually claims you and me far more than 12 scout laws. Christ has claimed you and me for a life lived into God's values and God's work. And what is that life and that work?

Scripture tells us:

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation..... So we are ambassadors for Christ., since God is making his appeal through us: we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

We Christians call this new creation, "Salvation" meaning healing/wholeness in Christ. It is the ancient shalom of the Old Testament, God's reign of peace and justice for all people.

American Indian people have the highest rates of poverty, homelessness, and joblessness, as well as the lowest graduation rates demographically in northeastern Minnesota. Police Departments throughout our Synod have been highly criticized for ugly relationships with American Indian communities. White community members speak openly about abolishing treaty rights, reservations, and tribal sovereignty. Native people exercising their right to hunt, fish, and gather continue to be harassed. Newspapers are often forced to remove articles about Indigenous rights because of their hate-filled comments. In the church, we have had pastors leave their call over parishioner pressure to end relationships with tribal communities.

Systemic Racism is what we are dealing with here:

Systemic means – it's in the very system or DNA of our culture. It is more than personal racism, more than degrading words from this person or that individual; It permeates the way our culture is set up; Who gets to thrive, who gets to

be heard, who is important and who isn't based on skin color. It goes so deep, it's thought of as "normal", and as the way things simply are. Systemic racism is racial bias across all of society, giving privileges to white people. Like me.

"Together Here" is our synod's total commitment to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and its inherent deep seated racism, originally with the goal to host a service of repentance and reconciliation. But not in a superficial way. The journey towards authentic reconciliation takes deep listening, bridge building, education, understanding broken treaty rights, walking physically through a "Blanket" exercise with others, and relationship building with Indigenous communities right here in our synod. Together Here has been doing this for nearly three years now, forging a way forward in a wilderness of both blatant racism against American Indians and a complicit silence: churches not speaking out. Together Here has held numerous weekly opportunities for months with people in our synod, and with partners from the schools and social service agencies who are seeking to do what is right, what is just. Together Here is seeking you and your congregation to be allies in this good and just work.

I don't believe we are born racist. I think we learn it from our elders, our culture, our movies and video games, even our friends, and we continue it by the choices we make that perpetuate the sin of racism and the ongoing degradation of our Indian neighbors. Even if you and I don't make antiracist remarks about Native Americans, we consciously or unconsciously uphold aspects of white supremacy by what we do or don't do, by what we say, and when we don't courageously stand up against the Native America racism. Here's what I do believe: I need to repent. Repentance means "turning completely around", deliberately "going beyond the mind set" (and heart-set) that we currently have and taking action to move in the right direction, God's direction, God's reign of justice.

The Anti-Racism Team that I mentioned in last week's pastoral video falls under the ministry God has invited us into through Together Here Ministries. This means that Together Here will expand its ministry focus beyond the words explicitly stated in Resolution 17-1. For the existing team there will be little change. You will continue to answer God's call as laid out in Resolution 17-1 and continue the work of Bridge Building with our American Indian sisters and brothers in our synod. For Together Here Ministries, the expansion will mean that this ministry arm of NEMN Synod will have the addition of an Anti-Racism Team and will include:

- 1-allyship training
- 2-social justice events
- 3- learning opportunities focused on ending racism and systems that protect white privilege within our synod

This means that the workshops that Together Here has been hosting or the Respectful Conversation Event we'd been exploring prior to *Stay In Place*, for example, would fall under the scope of the Anti-Racism Team.

Deacon Candidate Colleen Bernu will sit on both the Bridge Building Task Force and the Anti-Racism Team. Until a call can be offered, she will continue on a stipend basis. Working with our Synod Council Pr. Amy Odgren, myself, and Deacon Brenda Tibbitts, we will continue to move towards extending a call for this ministry. Funding continues to be the sticking point in the call process.

I've invited Sister Krista Anderson and Mr. Luke Lekander in our Synod, as allies to help build the Anti-Racism Team. Luke Lekander is an approved candidate for minister of Word and Sacrament assigned to our synod, currently serving Our Savior's/Outing as a Synod Authorized Minister. Deacon Krista Anderson is a minister of Word and Service, lives in our synod and serves as our ELCA Region 3 Candidacy and Leadership Manager as well as Program Director for the Support of Ministers of Word and Service. Working collaboratively we will work to broaden participation with the Anti-Racism Team in this way:

- Seek opportunities for you and your congregations to build authentic relationships with our American Indian neighbors.
- Seek out Black, Indigenous, Brown and People of Color organizations near where you live. Attend their events. Sign up for their e-letters. Follow them on social media. Take whatever they offer without making

demands on them. Fight the urge to interject. Instead, listen. Accept that there is always more that can be done. Not one person or group can do it all.

- Commit to making changes so that the systems in our lives reflect God's justice and mercy built on an inclusive love that recognizes uniqueness and invites everyone to participate without conditions.
- Partner with Together Here Ministries through engagement and stewardship: Give directly to Northeastern Minnesota Synod ***Together Here Ministry***
- Participate in hosted events (watch our Synod FB page, and Together Here FB Group page and Events page, and our synod website for announcements)
- Challenge your congregation to openly talk about racism / white supremacy using resources provided by Together Here as guides
- Find ways to create sustainable personal responsibility, and commit to holding yourself accountable.

The words of Jesus:

"You are the Light of the World. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Mathew 5: 14-16

This is our work to do, dear Synod. It is hard work. It is good work. It is gospel and justice work. And we are not alone in this work. Trust Jesus. Trust his claim and his leadership in your life.

+Bishop Thomas M. Aitken
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