



# Evangelical Congregational Church

TO KNOW CHRIST AND MAKE HIM KNOWN

June 4, 2020

Dear EC Family,

My heart is broken every time I look at the news. The evidences of sin, lostness, and brokenness are on display all around us. I watch people turning against each other. Hear language and characterizations of people that come from dark places in the human heart. Violence from every side. Justice in short supply. Cities, communities, and neighborhoods being torn apart. And our culture has no idea how to respond. In my lowest moments I wonder if the Lord is saying words similar to those recorded in Genesis 6:5-6, "The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So, the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart."

There are moments when I look at the hatred on full display and wonder what's wrong with people. But I am snapped back to reality and the condition of my own heart when look in the mirror and hear Jesus' words, "I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgement! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell." [Matthew 5:22] I am reminded that it was to the religious people who pointed out another's sin that Jesus said, "Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone." [John 8:7] I am included in the biblical truth that "Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." [Romans 3:23] I find it difficult to believe that anyone living today could argue against the doctrine of human depravity.

And yet, God chose to offer mercy, grace, and love to the people he created if they would only turn to him out of their brokenness and sin. God sent his One and Only Son Jesus into this broken world to offer healing and wholeness.

I am thankful that the Evangelical Congregational Church has, since its beginning, stood out against slavery, racism, and the mistreatment of our fellow humans of every race, nationality, language, and color. It's an important part of our denomination's history, and yet we cannot rest on historical statements or take smug satisfaction that we have been on the "right" side. The truth of history is important; but wisdom is the application of truth in our lives and relationships today.

We were supposed to consider possible amendments to our denomination's *Discipline* during National Conference. Unfortunately, we all know conference was cancelled due to the pandemic. While it is not the adopted position of the Evangelical Congregational Church, I would like to share with you the proposed statement on Human Rights as well as some of the language from Poverty and World Hunger that were to be presented because I think it speaks to us today:

#### **144.4 Human Rights**

It is only as bearers of the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27; James 3:9) that men and women possess "natural" or, preferably, God-given rights that animals and things do not have in the same sense or to the same degree (Matthew 10:31; Matthew 6:25). We believe all men are created equal and that all should have equal rights. In addition to the direct statements of Scripture regarding the dignity of mankind, duties enjoined upon people, such as worship of God (Exodus 20:3-4), concern for the poor (Deuteronomy 15:11), and the prohibition of murder, lying, and stealing (Exodus 20:13-14, 16) imply corresponding rights to freedom of worship, life, truth, and property.

Since these rights derive directly from God, no state may deny them legitimately to its upright citizens. Government is rather under obligation, as a divine institution, to protect these rights. All rights, natural and civil, must apply equally to all law-abiding citizens residing within a nation and must not apply selectively.

In the light of the Bible's uniform teaching of the equality of all humans (Genesis 1:26-27, Luke 6:31, Acts 17:26, Galatians 3:28, Philemon, 1 John 4:21) and the uncompromising call for human flourishing, we must seek by personal example, and appropriate legal means, to counteract all forms of racism, ethnic bias and supremacy of any people group wherever we encounter it in our churches, communities, and government. Oppressed and disenfranchised people groups, therefore, must have equal opportunities now, in alignment with our Christian faith and democratic ideals. We commit ourselves to a compelling Christian faith and Christian action until equality of opportunity and responsibility are realized by all without regard to ethnicity or national origin.

#### **144.5 Poverty and World Hunger**

When poverty is increased or sustained as a result of political and economic oppression by affluent nations or wealthy classes within a society (Jeremiah 22:3; Micah 2:2; James 2:6), we are obliged by love for the neighbor to speak against economic and political injustice and to strive for a more equitable distribution of the earth's ample, but limited, resources.

The endurance of the problems of poverty and hunger must never deter us from being God's agents of hope nor prevent us from preaching the gospel, which can meet the economic and social as well as the spiritual needs of mankind.

I admit, one of my weaknesses is simply who I am – an old, middle-class, white man. I cannot change that except that I keep getting further into the "old" category. Yes, I grew up in Allentown and attended the "rough" Junior High School and High School with all the inner-city kids. They were my friends; but I went home to my nice house every night. I see the world through that lens and my experiences over the last six decades. The question I ask myself and each of us is, how hard have I tried to see the world through someone else's eyes; from their perspective and position? Proverbs 18:2 says, "Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions." Therefore, may we be "...quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." [James 1:19]

Years ago, my "trial sermon" was on 2 Corinthians 5:20, "So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead 'Come back to God!' For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." A lot has changed over all the years; but one thing has not. May we, as followers of Jesus, never forget that we are bearers of the message of reconciliation. God has not given up on this world or humanity. He has not turned his back or walked away. He has not yet destroyed us in judgement. Instead he sends us into our neighborhoods, our communities, and our world as living examples and representatives of his mercy, grace, and love. May God's Holy Spirit speak to our hearts and open our eyes and ears that we may represent him well in a lost and broken world.

In Christ's Service,



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Pastor