

Good afternoon Assembly voting members, guests, presenters, and Synod staff. My name is Elaine Hilton Whitney and I am the Vice President of the Sierra Pacific Synod. Many thanks to the Assembly Planning Team, the esteemed speakers, to our amazing staff, and to all who have worked hundreds of hours behind the scenes to make our Assembly an inviting and invigorating experience. I am very grateful for the work of the Synod Council over this past year and I thank the outgoing members for their steadfast service.

I have attended a Synod Assembly in Fresno before. It was 2013 and I had been on Synod Council for two years. I came to Fresno and worked with a small group on budgeting issues. The meetings were tense and I came away from them exhausted. One evening, I came downstairs in the elevator without my badge on. As other Lutherans got on the elevator, they carefully looked away from me and did not speak to me. I'm sure they ignored me because I am Black and they didn't speak to Black people they didn't recognize or know. It was a low moment for me. In my return to Fresno, I have chosen to address racism as part of my Church story and as a part of our Church story. My remarks today will include a short bible reading, some reflections on my Church story, and my hopes for our Church story as we continue the mission and ministry of the Lutheran Church at this time and in this place.

This is a reading from Luke, Chapter 24, verses 28-32:

“²⁸As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

Word of God, word of life.

This bible passage is part of the story of the two followers who encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Emmaus is a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem and the followers were so overwhelmed with grief and fear that they could not recognize Jesus until he broke bread with them. We can learn so much from this story. We are often overwhelmed and cannot see God’s love all around us. We need God’s help and we also need the support and companionship of each other. My hope is that my story and our story will clear our sight and gives us the courage to see Jesus and resist the sin of racism. I go through life, Black all of the time, when I drive, when I fly, when I work, when I talk with peace officers, when I come to Synod Assemblies. The opportunities that I receive and the obstacles that I overcome are influenced, in part, by being Black in America. My resistance of racism rests on the generations of saints who have connected me with faith, culture, and the body of Christ.

I have spent most of my professional career in education and a book that is very popular among my teacher friends is, ***All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten***. Robert Fulghum (full – jum), a Unitarian pastor, shared basic understandings about life that we have already learned by the end of kindergarten. I attended a school that did not have a kindergarten but I was lucky and I got to student teach in kindergarten. Fulghum shared this great life lesson, “When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”



When I saw this picture, I was excited and happy in part because racism has made this image bold and challenging. Racism makes this picture uncomfortable for some of us instead of ordinary. If you showed this picture to kindergarten students, they would tell you that this is 'holding hands'. They might smile because they know how to hold hands but it wouldn't be a big deal to them. So, I ask myself and I ask you why this is a bigger deal to us. Perhaps my Church story and your Church stories will offer us some answers.

I am part of a Church history in San Francisco that goes back 165 years. My baptismal congregation, Bethel A.M.E., recently celebrated 165 years of ministry. They are Gold Rush-initiated community for African-Americans who came west to California seeking a good life. Bethel was founded in 1852, before the end of slavery in the United States, but California did not permit slavery as a part of its State Charter. California was not a bias-free

place for African-Americans in 1852 as we were not able to vote, homestead, testify in court, or entitled to a public education. African-Americans needed a respite from the racism of the outside world and Bethel offered that place of belonging and shelter. My pastor, Reverend J. Austell Hall, had a wonderful presence in the Church and in the community. He could smile and you would know that life was good. This is where I participated in my first Christmas play. At Bethel, Black people were cared for, respected, and cherished for their lives in the Church. It was the one place where all adults were addressed with respect, and by their title, (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Dr., Rev.) and as a child, I had no idea who worked in an office, who owned a business, who worked as a janitor, or who scraped by on odd jobs. Everyone was a person and fully seen. Church gave me that intangible experience of being fully human and beautiful in the eyes of God. Church was the place where I learned about sharing my gifts as freely as they had been received. Church was a place where the respected elders passed on the wisdom and love that had sustained them through hard times. Education was valued as a way to attain greater access to the American mainstream; if the congregation could send a young member to college, the Church would make it happen. We knew that racism existed; we did not hide our eyes or pretend.

The sin of racism was all around us but the Church reminded us that we were all children of God.

I had the great opportunity to attend St. Paulus Lutheran School and to be confirmed at St. Paulus Lutheran Church. St. Paulus is celebrating 150 years of ministry this year. In my confirmation year, I was taught about Lutheran Theology and Christian Doctrine by Reverend Roland Grumm. The Church supported Christian K-9 education for children of the neighborhood and other families that did not want to send their children to public school. The Church did this knowing that many of the students would be children-of-color; the congregation had a majority of European-American members and older people. In this environment, I learned about

grace and was encouraged to sing Bach chorales and attend folk worship with acoustic guitars. This was also the first time I sipped from the common cup at the communion table.

The sin of racism was all around us but the Church educated children of all ethnicities so that we would see that we were all children of God.

As an adult, I joined St. Francis Lutheran. We recently celebrated 110 years of ministry in San Francisco. With the wonderful community of St. Francis, my heart is home in Church. I know that I am wanted, cared for, and seen because my congregation shows me love. A majority of European-American members chose me to step forward into leadership and others stepped back. My congregation is made up of old-fashioned, Lutheran agitators: for peace, for justice, for the rights of animals, for marriage equality, for LGBT pastors, for racial justice, for sanctuary status, for women in the Church, for educational opportunities for all children. Reverend Doctor Robert Goldstein and Reverend Doctor Dawn Roginski were my first pastors at St. Francis. They asked me to join a committee right away and the elders of the congregation guided me toward active service in the congregation. I trained as an assisting minister and took communion to people in the hospital. St. Francis is well-known for its stand on calling gay pastors; it is less celebrated for its work to combat racism. We sponsored a multicultural childcare center decades ago that continues to be a part of our ministry to the children and families of the community.

The sin of racism was all around us but the Church showed love for all God's children through leveled educational and social opportunities for children of many ethnicities, financial circumstances, and languages.

Racism clouds our judgment and makes us see each other and events in distorted ways. Racism tells us that some of us are more worthy and some of us are less worthy. Racism makes us turn away from the goodness and the fullness of life that God has promised us. Racism shows our failings, our limitations in being whole in the Body of Christ. Racism feeds our brokenness. **Racism is not a Christian value.** We must push back against racism, in all places and at all times. We are not strong enough to fight racism alone but we have the gifts, together, to turn the Church into a place where love continues to triumph over sin.



Here are the two dear souls that were holding hands in the first image, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. You'll notice that they are not looking around to take a photo op; they are focused on listening to each other and sharing their experiences. We can push back against racism in the Church but only together, only with God's help, and only with our eyes open. We must help each other remember that we are children of God; that we are all precious to our Creator.

We are on the road to Emmaus together. We keep missing Jesus, ignoring him, being blind to him, and not feeling his presence because we have not kept enough company with each other to be brave about standing with Jesus. Let us walk together. Each of us will bring our blind spots but together we will help each other see Jesus in our lives. We should be calling pastors of color to our congregations in transition. We can support people of color considering seminary. We can encourage people of color to step forward into Church leadership while some European-descent people step back into a listening and supporting role. We can support ethnic specific Lutheran associations. We can support racial justice ministries. We can share each other's troubles and rejoice in each other's triumphs. We can go into the world (and into the Church) with our best kindergarten skills and: Watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

The sin of racism is all around us but the Church can be a place where all are loved and cherished. We need this now and we ask God to help us.

I thank you for your time and your presence here at the Assembly of the Sierra Pacific Synod. May God bless us in our journey together and may God bring us to wholeness in the Body of Christ. Thank you!