

Today I wish to address folks on both sides of the mask issues, those for a mask requirement and those opposed and any and all folks in our community affected by this pandemic. To do so, I wish to provide the appropriate context, I want to relive with you some trials and unity our state and nation have lived. Only 5 years ago, we experienced the shooting at the Mother Emanuel church in July and then in October the 1000 - year floods. Now in 2020, the whole world has been rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. What have we learned that we can apply now?

It was July 2015 when my mother-in law came to visit my family, a few days after the Mother Emanuel shooting. After picking her up from the airport in Charleston, we drove downtown and we stopped by the Mother Emanuel church. I walked through the crowd, up to the church, where a group of men were singing and praying. It was a beautiful and shocking experience for me, I found myself standing and looking at unity in spite of the pain, in the midst of worship to God despite an unthinkable tragedy. I remember the images from Charleston, thousands of folks walking across a bridge together in unity, and specifically the members of the church, the choice they made to forgive. Nikki Haley wrote in her book “the choice the families made for forgiveness rather than hate literally made it possible for the state to heal.” These acts of forgiveness shocked our nation. If you recall, our nation was dealing with the fallout from the unfolding of events in Ferguson related to Michael Brown in August 2014, Tamir Rice in Cleveland in November 2014, Freddie Gray in Baltimore in April 2015, and the shooting of Walter Scott in Charleston in April 2015. The nation had raw open wounds regarding race. All eyes were on South Carolina and it could have turned very ugly. The way the family members of the victims, the members of Mother Emanuel church, and the way our state responded after the tragic events at Mother Emanuel church has never left me. It is a shining example of grace, forgiveness, and healing. This forgiveness and grace promoted unity.

A few months later, we experienced flooding in our state to the degree that it was branded then and remains known today as the 1000-year flood. I had the honor of leading a team of volunteers and we went to help cleanup in the Cold Stream neighborhood. This was one of the most sobering experiences I’ve ever had. In

this case, mutual support promoted healing. I specifically remember walking the street, not really even knowing where to begin, when a man invited my crew up to his house and gave us instruction on what he needed to be done. This man whose belongings were about to be all taken out to the street, who had a terribly damaged home, had a joyful heart and prayed with us then got us to work. I vividly remember his face. I will also never forget how many trucks, teams, and people were there, all to help each other. The people of our community and the people from our state came together. We were able to heal because we came together.

Now I would like to invite you to travel back to WW2. Our country unified at the face of a common enemy. Things were certainly not easy after our homeland was attacked in Pearl Harbor, but we came together as a people and as a country to defeat our enemy and come out victorious after WW2. The grit, determination, and hard work put in both by our soldiers at war and by the support of industry and family back home, this unity helped us arrive on the other side. Our nation thrives when we are united.

That brings me to today and the unexpected pandemic we face today. The effects of the pandemic have been absolutely shocking, they have rocked our world, our country, our state and our town. It is not necessary for me to hash out all of the challenges that our community has faced as a result of the pandemic, as each of us have been feeling the effects and continue to feel the effects.

I understand the controversial nature of the mask requirement in the town of Lexington. A relevant question is “what is the desired outcome?” I would like to suggest to you all that our desired outcome, our goal, is to beat this virus. To arrive on the other side of this pandemic just like we did with the many challenges mentioned. I am ready and I know all of you are ready to move on with our lives and a return to normalcy. Each council member has had to make a decision on masking with the information we have been provided and from the

sources near us directly impacted by our decision, such as our school district and our local hospitals.

I cannot help but feel very concerned by the divisions among us, while also feeling hopeful because of the paths paved for us by our shared past experiences, and knowing those experiences lead us to unity in our community.

Nikki Haley said, “During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices. We must resist that temptation.” “The way we handle issues and the way we talk about issues should be towards solutions, not division.”

Friends, town, despite our preferences, despite our differences let's stand united, today. My call today is that we come together, that we unite once again, that we adopt a spirit of love and a spirit of grace, working together as a community to beat this virus. We have such wonderful examples, as a nation, as a state, and as a community, of coming together to achieve a common goal. Let this time not be any different, together we can win. I implore each of you to join me in this call for unity, having a spirit of grace, and knowing that we are all working together to overcome this virus and move on with our lives with our freedoms intact and continuing our quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.