

Grace and peace to you all from God our strength and our redeemer – Amen.

There is an old saying that is often used to describe the ways we come to tell our shared history together – especially if that history has ever included an “us and a them” and it goes a little something like this - *“history is written by the victors.”*

It’s a saying that helps to tell a long-hidden truth that much of our recent learning on the intersections of race, politics, and colonialism have helped us to see: by not holding space for marginalized or oppressed people’s stories – our whole history has never truly been heard. And as a result, many African descent Canadians truths has been kept silent, forced underground, or censored for far too long.

And while I am by no means an expert on black history, racism, or have any lived experience as a Person of Colour – I can share what I have come to learn when I have taken a step back from my own place of white privilege to learn from my friends of African descent how to be an ally to them and their communities.

The first thing and foremost thing I have learned about being an ally, is that allyship begins with intentionally holding space for, listening to, and honouring the stories of those at the margins. And if I am being absolutely honest, I am often afraid I might make mistakes, misrepresent or obscure the realities of Black lives that this month is meant to explore. But if I don’t hold space for people of African descent to share their stories and histories, or honor the history I have learned by lifting it up – then my solidarity or allyship was really never there to begin with.

While we might not get things exactly right this month. While we might stumble over our words - I trust and know that in the midst of taking this step forward together to begin commemorating and celebrating Black History Month at Holy Spirit, it will help us start an important conversation here as a family of faith – in the ways we can equitably honor Black lives in sharing our stories as God’s beloved people here in this place.

I know this is an important step to take as a community because Black History Month was not something that was celebrated or addressed by the largely white privileged Christian community I grew up within Southern Alberta. It was never spoken about from the pulpit, named in the classroom, or spotlighted in any empowering way I can remember.

In fact, the only narrative I was taught about people of African descent during my youth, was through a book on *The Underground Rail Road*. While it was a powerful, poignant, and moving story about the lives of those taken in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – it was also a story that seemingly absolved Canadians from our own troubled history with slavery, racism, and oppression of Black lives.

And in a way, it was also a narrative that would set up a troubling tale that would come to be told throughout my education: that we Canadians did not suffer from the same delusions of

racism and oppression as our neighbors to the south because “our nation” was a multicultural country where all were welcome.

Yet, in this midst of this tale, the damaging undercurrents of racism and afrophobia were palpably present within my home town. They were sustained within the racialized jokes people would choose to tell in restaurants over lunch. They were held in the nicknames kids chose to shame individuals with who had darker skin. And they were supported by the systems that seemingly kept people of African descent from holding positions of leadership or power. In some ways, this kind of racism and oppression was a notion I wouldn't truly understand until much later in my life when I realized I had never truly heard stories of triumph, success, or joy from the Black community where I lived.

I was never taught about the rich history of African Descent Albertan's who made real and lasting impacts in our province and wider world. Amazing people like John Ware, an emancipated Black American who worked at the turn of the nineteenth century to establish a famous ranching dynasty just outside of Calgary that would spur on steer wrestling one day at the Stampede.

Or trail blazing female leaders like Viola Desmond (from Nova Scotia) who we learned about during our children's time this morning and Violet King who in the early 1950's became the first black Albertan to obtain a law degree and be admitted to the Bar in Canada. She practiced criminal law for several years in Calgary before moving to Ottawa to work in the federal department of Citizenship and Immigration. In her various roles in the department, she travelled throughout the country meeting leaders from different service and community organizations giving speeches discussing racism and her hopes for gender and race equity.

It was stories like these that needed to be told.

Which is why in 1926, Carter G. Woodson introduced Black History Month to raise awareness and acknowledge the accomplishments and influential experiences of people of African descent around the world. This is why many churches, cities, and countries have come to hold intentional space each February to commemorate Black History month within their communities.

Celebrating Black History Month is one small way that we can attempt to get a fuller picture and understanding of our story as the whole people of God - because it is through the lives and stories of people of African descent that we find a narrative richly woven with the themes of the gospel. Stunning examples of what justice and reconciliation should look like, which serve as a reminder of the unifying truth of love and equality that Jesus spoke of throughout his ministry.

The Bible contains countless stories intended to remind us of the trials and events that shaped our spiritual heritage as God's people. Hundreds of verses in Scripture address the idea of remembrance, encouraging us to reflect upon past triumphs and tragedies that call us to reorient our hearts towards God's grace and love.

In our first reading today from the fourth chapter of Joshua, God commands Joshua to set up twelve stones in remembrance of Israel's miraculous crossing of the Jordan River. The stones would stand as an everlasting memorial to communicate to future generations the provisions Yahweh had given them. The stones were a faithful witness of a faithful God who understood the tendency of humans to forget.

Black History Month serves us and those who come after us much like those memorial stones. By remembering and retelling the stories, we honor and celebrate the courageous examples set by people of African descent.

But it is also more than that - as my good friend and ELCIC Pastor Emmanuel Aristide reminded me as we spoke of his personal experiences with black history this week. He shared: *History for people of African descent, just like ancient Hebrews, was never meant to be read, but rather to be heard and experienced in the present time. For Black people, history is not something of the past. Your ancestors' stories, good or bad, are stories you carry with you, it becomes part of your identity. It is part of who you are. Knowing the good, the bad and the ugly allows us to do what is right in the present time, and avoid the mistakes of the past. History or stories of the past are not something to satisfy one's intellect only, but rather it is used to educate and move one's heart from a place of ignorance to comprehension and understanding. History is not only informative; it must be transformative. And what allows this, is one's connection/relationship to that person. History means nothing without relationship.*

While some stories are filled with joy and others may be harder to hear about, we hold space to remember them all, so that the next generation will see our memorial stones and strive toward restoration, justice, hope, and peace.

When we begin honoring a people and a culture made in the image of God and teach our children to do the same, we create a legacy of hope for racial reconciliation, both inside and outside the church.

The church's recognition of Black history ought to be based out of our sincere love and welcome of all God's children. A love and welcome we ourselves have all received from God. May this month enliven our memories so that every month is one in which we see each other as beloved children of God with stories to be honored and held.

And may this be so among us – Amen.