

Grace and peace to you all from Christ – the one who calls us all to be one in the love of God and of one another – Amen.

A blessed Black History Month to you, Holy Spirit!

The histories and contemporary stories we hold space for during this month celebrate Black excellence, innovation, leadership, care for community, and perseverance through systemic adversities. Black History Month is an intentional time for our church to uplift accomplishments within Black communities that have and continue to impact our lives and world for the better today.

We have been blessed within our congregation by stories from those like Thompson Nunifu, a long-time member here at Holy Spirit who shared what it was like for his family to come to Canada from Guyana and to make Edmonton their new home. We also remember the stories of historical figures, like the Black pioneers of Amber Valley, or Pauline King Henry – the first Black person to graduate Law School in Alberta, to be called to the bar, and the first Black Woman to serve as a lawyer in Canada.

Another reason we commemorate Black History Month is to reflect on our position as a predominantly white Lutheran congregation on Treaty Six territory. Many of our families' stories are part of a White European settler narrative that has been central to our educational systems and church history. So, by intentionally holding space for the histories and experiences of the Black community, we are more fully acknowledging that we haven't had the opportunity to hear the complete story of God's beautiful creation.

It serves as a reminder for us that we reflect a more comprehensive picture as God's people and God's kingdom when we celebrate the triumphs, pains, and healings of everyone together as a family of faith. And that's why uplifting Black history, lives, and stories has become so important for us at Holy Spirit as we strive to both live and proclaim "all are welcome and *all means all*".

The idea of putting aside time for the study of Black history originated with Carter G. Woodson – a twentieth century historian, author, and journalist. Woodson was greatly concerned that Black children did not have an opportunity to learn about their ancestors' great achievements in schools. So, in February 1926, he launched the first Black History Week to encourage Black Americans to discover more about their history and heritage – a practice that has since been adopted by countries throughout the world to better centre Black Lives, stories, and histories.

Every year a new theme is chosen for Black History Month, which focuses on relevant topics impacting Black communities today. This year's theme is "*Ours to tell*" – representing both an opportunity to engage in open dialogue, and a commitment to learning more about the stories Black communities in Canada have to tell about themselves.

Today we're blessed to hold space for a reflection written by one of our members and 2022 FLIP (*Faith and Leadership Internship Program*) Intern, Naomi Nunifu, titled *Reflections on Black History Month for Holy Spirit Lutheran Church*.

I'm so grateful for her thoughts, which illustrate what it means to be the "one people of God" John calls us to in our Gospel lesson, and what it means to show respect and love across our differences in safer spaces where anti-racism work can then take place.

It is not always easy to share such intimate ideas and expressions of ourselves, so we give thanks for her thoughtful and caring contribution in sharing with us all a part of "her story to tell" about growing up Black within our church and world.

I encourage you to read her full reflection, hosted alongside this sermon on our website: HolySpiritLutheran.ca.

Naomi names part of her own journey toward finding and creating safe spaces to explore what it means to honor Black history and Black Lives. She writes:

Before I became coordinator for the FLIP Team last summer, and throughout my time with the FLIP Team I struggled to find a way to externalize these thoughts. When I first heard about the "missional thinking project" it overwhelmed me. I think it's because I got trapped in the notion that I needed to do something big to make a "real change". It's very hard to reign in that mentality, especially as someone who tries to stay aware of issues on social media where there's this notion that you need to stay 100% on top of every issue and if you're not being outspoken and bringing about some tangible change, then you don't care enough. It took me a while to take a step back and take a look at things from a different angle. I ended up fixating on the idea of creating a "safe space".

"What is a safe space? What makes a safe space? Does one already exist? What does my ideal safe space look like?" These were all questions I tried to answer throughout the summer....

...When it comes to discussing issues of race, it is a very sensitive topic with centuries of history and emotion and trauma behind it. In trying to handle these subjects with care, we end up disconnecting from each other out of fear of offending or saying the wrong thing and becoming a bad person in the others' eyes. A safe space where people can ask whatever questions they have and work towards a better understanding of the experiences and issues of others is very, very hard to find, and understandably so..."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a similar desire to create a safe space that could address racism and other forms of oppression. In his first book, *Strive to Freedom*, Dr. King imagined a beloved community where all could truly be free of the harms of injustice. He wrote:

In the beloved community, poverty, hunger, and homelessness are not tolerated. Instead, an all-inclusive spirit of siblinghood will replace racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice.

Unfortunately, years later, we know that this beloved community has not yet manifested. Our society is still inundated with discrimination, violence, white supremacy, mass incarceration, and other blatant injustices faced by racialized peoples.

However, we know and trust that people have been intentionally working toward the reality of such a beloved community coming within our midst. I believe the Church – God’s people – have a significant role in making this community a reality.

Throughout history, when the Church is at its best, it has been a place for healing, help, love, and hope for the least, last, and lost. God’s people have also long been the prophetic voice for the marginalized and oppressed people who continue to rise above all injustices. I’m thinking of people like the prophet Isaiah who foretold of a time of equity, justice and hope would come in God’s name, or Moses and Aaron who led the once enslaved Israelites to find the promised land by God’s hand, or the women at the tomb, who against all odds were the first to share the good news that Christ had risen – even if Jesus’ very disciples refused to believe them.

When God’s people are attentive to the call of the One who names us all beloved, we begin to see the fruit of this morning’s Gospel: Christ’s call to love ourselves and one another as God has loved us. As Saint John describes it, this love clearly cannot depend on feelings of attraction, desire, affection or even liking. The love Jesus is speaking about in our gospel lesson is a behavior-shaping attitude toward the world, which is both a gift we cannot manufacture and a choice to live into the promises of that gift that is already given to us.

Like branches of a vine, another metaphor used by John to describe this relationship of love with God, we live in something larger than ourselves, in which we are nurtured to bear fruit by the Spirit dwelling in us. But because we are more than vines, we also become more loving by choosing to follow Jesus’ model and teachings about what love is: Tending, feeding, bearing witness, and breaking barriers of oppression and injustice like racism for life giving love.

When we live like this, we see the world and creation as God sees it—a web of relationships, each beloved child of God with their own gifts and purpose contributing to something that is greater than they are.

In her reflection, Naomi shares her hope for such a community among us at Holy Spirit and beyond:

“For now, I don’t think the perfect ‘safe space’ I’ve envisioned will every truly exist for many reasons. What constitutes a safe space will end up being a little different for everyone, so my idea of a safe space could end up going against someone else’s idea of a safe space. It ends up bringing me back to the

overwhelmed feeling I had at the beginning of the project, since there's no 'one size fits all' solution that will make everything okay.

So instead of getting stuck in that feeling of helplessness, all we can really do as people is our best, if we approach each other with good intentions and a willingness to learn we can create a welcoming environment for these kinds of discussions to be had. Even if a resolution can't be reached, putting forth the effort would still be a step in the right direction."

With the wisdom of Naomi, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Carter G. Woodson, we hear that a faithful response to Black History Month is to surrender to this reality: That God creates all of us in their divine image, that we all might see the divine spark of love within each of our hearts, so that we can work together to create a more just, equitable, and beloved community where all can know and be truly known in God's love.

What a challenge, and what a gift, it is to be able to honor Black Lives and stories as a beloved community of faith. Thanks be to God for that! It is my prayer that we would continue to grow into that gift and challenge in response to the great love of the one who first loved us. And through it all, I trust that God will continue to be at work within and among us this Black History Month at Holy Spirit, as we hold space for the community to share about their lives, their stories, and their histories in great love.

And may this be so among us - Amen.