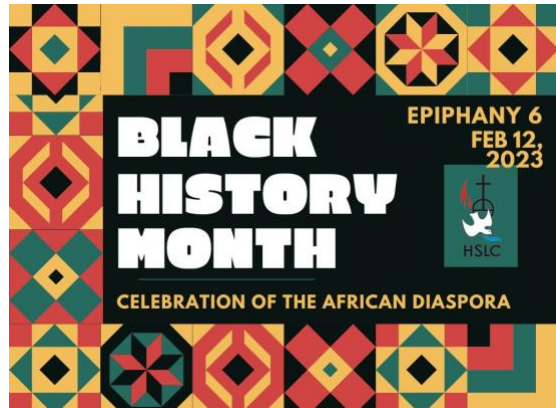


Reflections on Black History Month for Holy Spirit Lutheran Church

Written by Naomi Nunifu – February 2023



I consider myself very lucky to be able to be a part of so many accepting communities including Holy Spirit Lutheran, and fortunate that I haven't experienced anything like the types of visceral discrimination you see on the news, but there is a fear that is always there in the back of my mind. A voice telling me to watch how I present myself, how I speak, how I look, how I act, just in case. Its like a constant feeling that I'm being watched or evaluated, that someone is waiting for me to slip up.

Throughout junior high especially is when I felt it the most, this fear that I was "too black" or sometimes that I "wasn't black enough". An irrational fear that wormed its way into all of my friendships and interactions with people, too scared to let people know when something they said made me uncomfortable or offended me. I'm in a much better place now and I don't think of that time of my life as being a negative and even though I know better now I don't think less of my past self for not knowing.

I don't really remember when it was that I first realized that I was "Black". When I was younger It never really clicked with me that I was different from the other kids, the colour of my and my family's skin was just something that we had, my hair was just coily because I didn't like to brush it, we ate different food because every family eats different food, but I was still the same as all my friends and they never treated me like I was different. I don't think the concept of race really hit me like an epiphany, it was more like a gradual awareness over time that, try as I might, I would never actually be like my friends. Its hard to believe I used to think like that, these days it feels like everything around me is constantly reminding me that I'm black. The news, twitter, tiktok, even just walking through downtown sometimes.

With the rise of awareness of racially charged violence that has been going on for the past few years, that fear I used to felt had come back almost in full force, except this time I wasn't the child who could look past and ignore things that bothered me. Every new gruesome video or picture or article, every volatile tweet and the pages of arguments that came with them, every new name that came up on the news, and the hopelessness of following each court case praying that maybe this time justice would be served. It hurt just hearing about all of this constantly knowing that this was the reality black people had to face, that I could have faced or still face, solely because of the colour of our skin.

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 its because I got trapped in the notion that I needed to do something big to make a "real change". Its very hard to reign in that mentality, especially as someone who tries to stay aware of

Reflections on Black History Month for Holy Spirit Lutheran Church

Written by Naomi Nunifu – February 2023

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.

I had the chance to speak with ELCIC Rostered Leader Reverend Emmanuel Aristide before writing this thanks to Pastor Lindsey. It was a really enlightening and validating experience talking to him about race, religion, and social justice. When I asked him about safe spaces, his response was something I didn't consider before. When it comes to discussion 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. It is a very sensitive topic that can be easily mishandled.

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.

Written by Naomi Nunifu – February 2023