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Genesis 1:26-27; Ephesians 2:11-21

SACRED HISTORY

February is designated as Black History Month—a month in which we are encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments of African Americans and a time given to recalling Black Americans' specific lived experience in this country. As some people will accurately reflect, Black History Month is not just for or about Black people. Black history is *American* history.

Black history is also *Christian* history. Within the history of the Black experience in America, we learn about the involvement of Christians in acts of oppression and Christians in acts of liberation. So this month becomes an important moment for Christians to engage their own history.

There is yet another dimension to the observance of Black History Month that makes it important for Christian communities like ours to recognize. Woven into the history of African Americans, we people of faith discover important themes of the gospel of Jesus Christ. By exploring Black history in America we come to better understand God and God's intentions for humanity, to face humanity's fallen nature, and to see evidence of God's deliverance, love, and reconciling work. That is part of what we discover when we explore African American history. And that means that Black history is also *sacred* history. In exploring Black history, we people of faith are also exploring sacred history.

That sacred history begins all the way back with the creation of humanity made in the image of God, what is called the *imago Dei*, in Latin. We heard that story read today from the Book of Genesis. Being made in the image of God means humans are made to reflect God's

likeness of love and goodness, mercy and compassion, justice and generosity. It means you and I are created with sacred worth. The gospel accounts of Jesus reveal the coming of one who perfectly lived out the *imago Dei*. Jesus' ministry was about teaching us and showing us what living out and living into the image of God for ourselves and for one another looks like.

So, we Christians honor the *imago Dei*, the image of God, the sacred worth with which all humanity is created, when we observe Black History Month. During this month all Americans are encouraged to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions and gifts that African Americans have given our nation. For us Christians, what this means is acknowledging the ways God's image was and is revealed in the talents and efforts of African Americans. Certainly we know some of the big names in African American history: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Shirley Chisholm. But we are also invited to look beyond the historical giants to recall lesser known figures who have shaped our society and world and church for the better.

The bulletin insert today highlights the lives and work of James and Melva Costen, a married couple whose gifts and dedication and steadfast faith in God made lasting contributions to our Presbyterian denomination. I invite you to take that insert home and read about these two people whom you have probably never heard of before, but whose life work and dedication to the Christian faith made our denomination a better place. We celebrate how the teaching and leadership and musical talents of these two people revealed the image of God so that we might discover that image within ourselves.

But part of our human history, our *Christian* history, is the shameful history of *not* honoring or revering the *imago Dei* of others. The image of God in others was not honored in the Transatlantic slave trade. It was not honored under Jim Crow laws of segregation. It was not

honored in the practice of red-lining in the housing market. It was not and is not honored in the acts of violence against African American bodies through lynchings or mass shootings or police brutality. An essential part of the gospel of Jesus is owning up to human sin and facing human brokenness. That is part of the gospel and we are called to do this individually in our personal lives. And we are called to do this collectively.

Observing Black History Month affords the opportunity to unmask the human sin of racism in both the past and present and extends to us the need to answer God's call for repentance and change. And thus, Black History Month becomes an opportunity for Christians to exercise an essential element of the gospel: honest confession and recognition of our brokenness and need for change regarding racial injustice.

Our Christian faith will simply not permit divisions among peoples. Divisions among peoples is *inconsistent* with the Christian faith. The Apostle Paul addresses this matter in his letter to the Ephesians. In Jesus' world there were very deeply entrenched social and religious divisions between Jews and Gentiles. But after Jesus' death and resurrection, the early church made up of Jewish followers of Jesus, faced a strange reality: Gentiles were converting and beginning to follow the way of Jesus as well. And now these two formerly divided peoples, peoples who had lived with hostility toward one another, had to interact and deal with one another.

Paul writes to the Ephesians that Christ has transformed and eliminated all their former divisions. He states, "For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Paul goes on to state that Christ's love has created what he calls "a new humanity," where those divided are now reconciled in him.

And thus, racial reconciliation is not just important social policy, it is central to the Christian faith. Observing Black History Month is one way we honor our unity in Christ. The wounds of African Americans are the wounds upon all Americans. The triumphs of African Americans are meaningful for all Americans. And in recalling the African American story in this country, we people of faith acknowledge that racial divisions and hostilities violate God's plan for humanity and are not faithful to the way of Jesus Christ. We must do better.

Voices from within the African American community have summoned America to do better. Just as the biblical prophets called God's people to do justice, there have been and remain modern prophets in the Black community as well as in the white community who have called for racial justice and have appealed to Christians to live out the biblical mandate for justice. Such voices point to Jesus' concern for the oppressed. Such voices remind us of God's concern for those on the margins and God's work of deliverance from bondage. These voices have made us better citizens and they have made us better Christians. During Black History Month we remember these voices and give thanks for the ways they have turned us from sin and toward a more faithful and just way of being.

And that may be one of the most important contributions we people of faith can give thanks for during Black History Month: the contribution African Americans have made to the gospel of Jesus Christ itself. When Christians from other races so badly disfigured and mangled the gospel of Jesus Christ through support of and perpetration of slavery, through racist policies, and racial violence--and sometimes still do--so many African Americans held fast to the liberating promises of the gospel, raised their voices to proclaim those promises, and so doing, they have pointed a way out of the bondage of sin and the way back to the good news of Jesus Christ.