

BLACK HISTORY MONTH CELEBRATIONS
ST. MARK'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, OTTAWA
BLACK CANADIANS: THE NARRATIVE AND THE VISION

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As I read the Bible readings while preparing this sermon, I was reminded that the more things change, the more they remain the same. This is because I found parallels between the narratives of the Jewish people in Biblical times and the narratives of persons of Black African descent living in Canada today.

Today's Old Testament lesson recounts the Jewish people's post-slavery sojourn to the Promised Land, when Moses received the Ten Commandments and God's Law on Mount Sinai. Centuries later when the transfiguration of Jesus took place, the Jewish people were living under the domination of the Roman Empire and were subjected to oppressive secular laws, dispersion, and economic exploitation. Prior to Jesus' transfiguration, Jesus told His disciples that He was to undergo great suffering and death at the hands of political and religious leaders who were enforcing the prevailing secular and religious laws. The outlook was bleak and dismal for Jesus' disciples. Feeling helpless and hopeless in the face of unjust secular laws, they must have also questioned their faith in God which was based largely on their adherence to the law given to Moses. They deeply yearned for deliverance from the oppression of the Roman Empire, and they desired to reclaim and assert their identity, which at that time, was rooted in the religious law of Moses.

Like the Jews at the time of the transfiguration, the history of people of Black African descent since the 16th century is marked by slavery and imperial domination, dispersion, and the dilution of their cultural identity. Like the Jewish people who lived under oppressive Roman laws, Black people lived under secular laws that were specifically intended to discriminate against them. Although there currently are anti-discriminatory laws, people from ethnic minority groups continue to face racism in Canada.

Our theme 'Black in Canada: The Narrative and the Vision' is relevant and timely. During Black History Month we have been listening to the narratives of Black people – our history, daily experience, disappointment, and success. In my presentation today, I will focus on the vision aspect of our theme. The Transfiguration of Jesus is a good place to start.

It is significant that the transfiguration takes place on a mountain. Mountains provide good vantage points from which to have a vision of the world below and receive inspiration from the heavens above.

In the transfiguration, Jesus is transformed temporarily from human to spiritual form. Jesus appears with Moses, the receiver of the law and with Elijah, the prophet and keeper of the law. As Moses and Elijah fade and disappear, Jesus' presence dominates. Jesus is exalted above the law and the prophets. God the Father affirms Jesus' divine mission, and He calls on the disciples to heed the teachings of Jesus. The transfiguration reveals that Jesus ***fulfills the law and the prophets***. Jesus' mission is to proclaim all that God intends the law to do.

And what does God intend the law to do?

The Bible is clear that the intent of any law, whether religious or secular, is to make us aware of what is right and what is wrong.

In Paul's epistle to the Romans (13:1-3), we are told that the role of government is to enforce secular laws to preserve public order and ensure that justice is equally extended to all citizens.

Jesus doesn't spend time calling for secular laws to be abolished. He shows his respect for the requirements of secular law when he declares in Mark's gospel (12:17) "Pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's." Jesus submits to the death penalty of secular and religious law. While on the cross, He adheres to the principle of God's law of love by forgiving his persecutors and the two criminals on either side of Him.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus' teachings go way beyond the rigid adherence of the precisions of secular and religious law. This is most evident during the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus calls on His listeners to examine their intentions for enforcing and adhering to secular and religious laws. Jesus defines the blessed outcomes of persons who intentionally hunger, thirst and are persecuted for their commitment to righteousness. Righteousness is being in right relationship with God that leads us to love our neighbors as ourselves, particularly the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

Jesus challenges the listeners to His Sermon on the Mount to be true changemakers – to be the salt of the earth. He encourages them, to be like Him, and go above the standards of the law and to be intentionally motivated by love and the quest for justice. Like light, Jesus' disciples are to radiate goodness so that people may see their moral excellence and praiseworthy good deeds.

So, what then is the relevance of the transfiguration of Jesus to Black History Month?

As we celebrate Black History Month, the transfiguration calls upon all of us to examine the legacy of history and to act intentionally to surpass the limitations of anti-discriminatory laws in Canada.

Let me explain.

Even though in 1793, the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada was passed, and the Slavery Abolition Act was enacted in 1834, the historical legacy of slavery still persists in Canada to this day. This is because slavery has had a lasting impact on Black Canadian life, both as a direct legacy upon the descendants of slaves and Black immigrants, and even more significantly, as a mentality produced in the dominant society.

Accustomed to regard all Blacks as slaves, colonial authorities in the 18th and 19th centuries imposed numerous obstacles on the Black Loyalists and refugees as they tried to establish themselves as free settlers in the Maritimes. Deprived of the promises of land and equal opportunity, early Black settlers in Canada were vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in employment and wages. Despite having artisan skills, Black Canadians in the early 20th century were further marginalized economically by the influx of working-class immigrants from Europe.

We have come a long way, yes, but what has emerged from the historical legacy of slavery, is **systemic racism**, which contributes greatly to the ongoing marginalization of Black Canadians and other minority groups.

Systemic racism occurs when **institutions** put people at a **disadvantage based on their race**. **This results in disparities in outcomes**, such as lower rates of academic achievement, underrepresentation in professions, restricted social mobility, and limited access to community services and places of worship. These disparities indicate the presence of systemic racism even when there may be **no racist intent**.

[For example](#), organized hockey, from Minor Hockey to the NHL, is predominantly White. Although there is no explicit policy that excludes people of color from participating in organized hockey, there are disproportionately fewer players who are Black or Indigenous. What is it that keeps organized hockey 'White'?

Playing hockey is expensive, time consuming for families, requires transportation and an accommodating parental work schedule. While there is no explicit intent to exclude non-White, lower-income, shift-working families from playing organized hockey, the system of organized hockey is designed by and for middle-class, professional White families.

Systemic racism may be present in the current membership of an institution, or the legacy of unexamined historical precedent.

One such example is in the Anglican Church. The creation of ethnic enclave congregations may be regarded as an unintentional continuation of the practice of the Canadian Anglican Church that prevailed in the 18th and 19th centuries when racist ideologies led to the creation of special congregations of Black Anglicans. The well-intentioned practices in the 20th and 21st centuries of recruiting Black priests from the West Indies to lead predominantly Black congregations with the expectation that specific cultural needs would be met, resulted in the creation of ethnic enclave congregations. However, there were no formal programs or processes to facilitate integration with non-Black congregations or representation in Diocesan decision-making, including the closing of churches in financial difficulty. A key learning from the experience of the closing of a Black congregation in the Diocese of Montreal a few years ago, is that in the absence of formal integration programs and representation in Diocesan decision-making, there is the perception that the Diocese does not regard ethnic congregations with equal importance as predominantly White congregations.

These are just two examples of institutions, which, like many more institutions in Canada, have not critically examined their historical practices regarding recruitment and the treatment of their non-White members. Consequently, systemic racism persists, even though there is no explicit racist intent and there is no contravention of anti-discrimination laws and anti-racist policies.

Through their own struggle against injustice and their insistence upon equality in the law, Black Canadians have bequeathed an impressive structure of constitutional rights from which all Canadians benefit today. Some examples include –

- **Fair Practices and Human Rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s**
- **The Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)**
- **The Employment Equity Act (1986)**
- **The Multiculturalism Act (1988)**

That said, Statistics Canada reported in a 2019 survey, that 46% of Black people over the age of 15 reported at least one form of discrimination in the previous 5 years. This percentage is significantly higher than the 28% result from a similar survey in 2014. These results tell us that racism continues to be an unmitigated problem that overshadows the vision of a diverse, inclusive nation that Canada aspires to become. ***Laws only establish minimum standards. Laws do not have the power to regulate the intentions of those who enforce the law.***

The world the Jews lived in at the time of the transfiguration was darkened by the pall of the ill-willed intentions of the oppressive Roman regime. There is still much darkness in our world today. Here in Canada the narrative of Black people has many dark patches and not enough bright spots.

In his Epistle, Peter affirms God the Father's declaration in the transfiguration that it is our responsibility to heed Jesus' teachings, and to shine in a dark world. The presence of light implies that there is understanding and vision.

Jesus' resplendent transfiguration teaches us that His Way will prevail and will achieve more than what the best intended laws cannot achieve. The transfiguration is a call to us, His disciples, to envision a world where the love of God, prevails through empathy, forgiveness, and justice.

The hard question that must be asked and answered is – How do we go beyond the narrative and make the vision reality?

Here are a few suggestions. These suggestions apply equally to non-Black and Black people!

Firstly, let's accept that Black history is not just about Black people. Black history is integral to Canadian history. We all came here in different ships, but we are now all in the same boat.

Secondly, the collective understanding of our history must lead to a critical examination of the state of things now and the definition of the ways in which we will intentionally dismantle systemic racism. We must have the courage to ask ourselves some tough questions about the possible ways we and the institutions to which we belong may be contributing to systemic racism.

- Are we prepared to examine historical precedent and current practices in organizations to which we belong?
- How do we engage during conversations about race? Are we listening *and* engaging in dialogue with facts, informed opinions and with empathy?
- How can we use our positions of leadership, influence, and privilege to make things better?

Thirdly, as people of faith, let's commit to being advocates and agents of change. Some ways to do this – create and sign petitions; attend and participate in public hearings and debates; write letters to political representatives; publish articles and opinion pieces on various communication platforms; challenge organizations in which you belong to be more inclusive in their membership.

Be prepared to have uncomfortable conversations. We don't know what we don't know. When a racially insensitive comment is made, create teachable moments by calmly addressing the issue, and by calmly

listening. Let empathy prevail by listening. Let love prevail by promptly apologizing and promptly forgiving. I've been in these situations in the workplace and in the church. The conversations have always started off awkwardly, but I promise you, they often end amicably, with everyone feeling relieved and reassured. You see, love always wins.

As we celebrate Black History Month and reflect on the transfiguration of Jesus, let us all be reminded that whenever love is at the core of our intentions, the will of God will always prevail. God's will is always for our individual and collective good!

It is the love of God that sustained enslaved Black people throughout their journey to freedom. It is the love of God and respect for human dignity that motivated the non-conformist Christian denominations to act intentionally and persistently until slavery was abolished. It is the love of God that motivated the Civil Rights Movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to advocate for inclusion and equal rights for all people.

The transfiguration message calls us to reflect on the paths we will forge during Lent as a people committed to following the way of Jesus, whose death is the ***greatest act of love ever committed for all humanity and provides us all the hope of the Easter resurrection.***

As we kneel at the altar to partake in Holy Communion today, let us remember that *it doesn't matter one bit* that there are differences in our racial or cultural identities. We are affirming our common identity as God's people – a people who have fully embraced the way of the transfigured Jesus; a people who, like the resurrected Jesus, are committed to intentionally love our neighbours as ourselves; a people committed to ensuring justice for all people. We come to the Lord's Table as equals, loved unconditionally by God and as members of the whole human race.

I want to leave you with the words of Nelson Mandela –

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Thank you and may God bless you all!

Amen.