

Sacred Ground Session 6: Americans, Not Foreigners: Exploring Asian/Pacific American History (Nov. 30, 2021)

This is the seventh article in a series to provide an insight into what the participants in the first St. Luke's Sacred Ground Circle learned over the past year of work. We will be providing one article a week through the summer to try to broadly capture the material that was presented. This will be supplemented by the personal statements of Circle participants describing what the experience meant to them and how they believe the Holy Spirit is calling them to respond.

We started this session reading Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest...” This, of course, is beautifully repeated in the final choral piece of the first section of Handel’s *Messiah*. The altos get a chance to shine, followed by the sopranos and then the passage is closed by a chorus for the entire choir. “His yoke is easy and his burthen is light.” Delightful to sing. Also important for the Sacred Ground experience. By this time in the journey, participants had been exposed in some detail to many stories of oppression of people of color, parts of our American history normally glossed over. Grief was the major emotion evoked, sorrow that our neighbors had been subjected to treatment that certainly fell far short of Christian ideals, and that Church members and the Church as an institution had often been silent or even complicit in this treatment. This passage reminded us that the life Jesus calls us into represents a way forward both for all who suffer from oppression and for the oppressors. Having this opportunity to simply listen to and honor these stories created in us a greater understanding of the hard work that is involved in living up to our charge to love our neighbors as ourselves.

For our opening prayer we recited a part of Psalm 137, which speaks poetically about the plight of God’s chosen people in exile, struggling to find joy in a foreign land. How ironic then, to consider the treatment of Asian/Pacific peoples in America, who can be treated as foreigners in their own homeland.

We reviewed the history of the treatment of Chinese immigrants to the western United States in the second half of the 19th century on the basis of another PBS film from the series “Ancestors in the Americas”. We saw how our society welcomed Chinese immigrants to perform the back-breaking work of building the transcontinental railroad, but then quickly shifted to seeing this group as a threat to “white labor” when these immigrants moved on to agricultural and other jobs. Mob violence, riots, and lynching ensued, as did the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law banning an immigrant group based on “race.” The economic motivations behind racism appear again. Interestingly, however, the film also presented the legal and cultural ways in which Chinese families and communities pushed back and forged their lives.

An article by Jeff Guo picked up in the second half of the 20th century, looking at the myth of the “model minority”: the evolution of discrimination against Asian Americans from prejudice and racist stereotyping to, in a sense, the granting of “permission” to assimilate into mainstream white culture. While it was in the self-interests of the Asian/Pacific communities to combat racism they encountered by portraying themselves as upstanding citizens, the development of the “model minority” stereotype also proved to be a powerful tool White politicians used to support a number of goals. Among these were proclaiming our country a racial democracy to justify our leadership during the Cold War, holding up traditional Chinese family values at a time when Communist China was dismantling them, and touting the positive portrayal of Asian Americans as a way to blame Blacks for their relative poverty. A powerful demonstration of how different communities of color are played against each other to serve White self-interest and how stereotypes take root.

A Washington Post article by Yanan Wang (Oct. 20, 2015) highlights the harmful effects of the model minority myth, such as how it renders invisible those Asian/Pacific American communities that are struggling –

economically, educationally, health-wise, and more. We also looked at current (2021) articles that revealed a surprisingly large degree of discrimination among Indian Americans and a report that documented 3,795 hate incidents against Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders between March 19, 2020, and Feb 28, 2021.

We learned that the history of the Asian mission in The Episcopal Church is marked by the Church's apathy and silence in the face of the series of anti-Asian immigration policies by the U.S. government from the 1880s to 1940s. However, after the 1965 Immigration Act removed de facto discrimination against Asians and other non-White peoples, many new Asian Episcopal congregations of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds were established, and today there are more than 140 Asian churches in The Episcopal Church. Thus, the Asian-American experience in The Episcopal Church contains stories of grief and hope, of death and resurrection.

We were chilled in the reading from Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* to put ourselves in the place of Americans who, owing to nothing other than the color of their skin, lived in fear spawned by the perpetual threat of violence everywhere. "Doomed on earth to a fixed and unrelenting status of inferiority, of which segregation is symbolic, and at the same time cut off from the hope that the Creator intended it otherwise," Thurman wrote, "those who are victimized are stripped of all social protection... Under such circumstances, there is but a step from being despised to despising oneself."

Debby Irving, in her book *Waking Up White*, recounted how she had been "conditioned not to see race at all," whereas people of color "had been conditioned not to bring up race to White people, resulting in an elephant in the room that helps maintain segregation, avoidance and racially socialized behaviors." Part of the power differential is that White people have the choice to ignore race & racism, but this is not an option open to people of color.

We used our breakout session to pick up on the theme of the opening Scripture and to reflect theologically on grief and lament. Each group started out by developing one simple sentence that reflected their reaction to the course thus far. We then explored that focus theologically, responding to questions such as "What vision of wholeness is broken in this focus? What conversion is that idea calling for? How would things look if they were made right?" The groups then connected their focus statement with Christian tradition (e.g., Scripture, liturgy, hymns, creeds, baptismal covenant, etc.) and with their own personal beliefs and experiences. Reflecting on all this, each group considered what God is calling them to do in response. To capture the theological reflection, each group developed their own prayer of lament, which we used to close the meeting.

Two of those focus statements and resulting lament prayers are listed here:

Statement 1: "The system of racial injustice prevails".

Lament: O God, the creator, who redeems our sins
You made us all in Your image
We have become blind to the suffering of our fellow neighbors
And to our part in it
We are truly sorry and we seek enlightenment
We confess that our fears have created deep divisions between us

Please God
Help us to understand and know ourselves
And to reach out to "others"
And learn to love one another as you intended

We ask this through the God of Justice and healing

Who sent his only son as an example
To teach us to love one another

We pray for your divine help in mending our divisions
And in making us aware of the
Humanity in each of us

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Statement 2: "Sad that racism has been & is so prevalent in our world, but hopeful that there can be change with learning our history."

Lament: O God
You created us in your image and gave us the gift of Jesus.
We are struggling with the problem of racism, we fail to see your image in the variety of people you created.
We have not loved one another as you love us.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
We want to learn from our great sins.
We seek your guidance for how to correct our actions so that we truly love one another and rebuild your creation.

We know that we cannot accomplish this on our own and that it is only with your help that we can make progress.
We thank you God for opening our eyes and hearts and trust you will guide our actions and in the fullness of time, carry out your plan of salvation. Amen

As a reminder, Sacred Ground, a film-based dialogue series on race and faith, is one tool that supports the Episcopal Church's long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation and justice under the banner of Becoming Beloved Community. The race dialogue series is an attempt to be responsive to the profound challenges that currently exist in our society, focusing on the challenges that swirl around the issues of race and racism, as well as the difficult but respectful and transformative conversation about race. It invites participants to walk back through history to peel away the layers that brought us to today, and to do that in a personal way, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. It holds the vision of beloved community as a guiding star – where all people are honored and protected and nurtured and beloved children of God, where we weep at one another's pain and seek one another's flourishing.