

## Sacred Ground Session 4: Exploring Black History (Nov. 2, 2021)

*This is the fifth 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 opened this session a little differently, listening to the text of the African-American Spiritual "There is a Balm in Gilead."

We discussed how the system of race-based, chattel slavery (in which Africans could be bought, sold and owned forever, though all their generations) evolved from the early colonial experience in which Africans were working in America as time-limited indentured servants alongside European indentured servants. We drew as a resource on the episode "The Black Atlantic: 1500 – 1800" from Henry Louis Gates' series *The African Americans*, which portrays many fundamentals of the history of the enslavement of Africans.

Drawing on an article "New England's Hidden History" by Francie Latour in the *Boston Globe* we also explored the many ways in which Whites in the North also contributed to and profited from the slave trade. This drove home the extent to which slavery was foundational to the birth and prosperity of this nation. We shared what we could discover about ways in which our own families or home towns had been involved in or touched somehow by the institution of slavery. We discovered that the web of economic complicity regarding slavery involved pretty much everyone in one way or another. We sat with this recognition, thinking about whether there are ways in which we unthinkingly participate in harmful systems in the present day.

We then split into small group breakout sessions to consider how do we come to terms with such an atrocity, one which is beyond our ability to comprehend. We asked ourselves how we can reckon with the fact that Christians and Christian institutions justified enslavement. (For an unfinished history of race and racism in the Diocese of Virginia see [https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/anti-racism/dioceses/Virginia\\_Study.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/anti-racism/dioceses/Virginia_Study.pdf))

We discussed what is to be gained by facing these stories. While they are stories of the past, they are the lived experiences of our ancestors and the ancestors of those who live with us. They inform the present in many complicated ways. While James Baldwin in his essay "The White Man's Guilt" speaks to European Americans' tendency to distance ourselves from blame, what might it mean for European Americans to come at the issues of slavery and racism from a place of grief and not guilt or defensiveness? This thought underpins the Episcopal Church's "Becoming Beloved Community" initiative [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/05/Becoming-Beloved-Community-Where-You-Are\\_2022.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/05/Becoming-Beloved-Community-Where-You-Are_2022.pdf). We reflected on the heartfelt responses of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Rev. Canon Stephanie

Spellers, and Bishop Andrew Waldo to visiting the historic slave forts during an Episcopal Church pilgrimage to Ghana.

Finally, we discussed the insights of Howard Thurman in his masterpiece *Jesus and the Disinherited* and Debbie Irving in her book *Waking up White*. Thurman, writing in the 1930s, argued that Christianity as an institution tends to side with the strong against the weak. The sin of pride and arrogance, Thurman argues, has caused the Church to lose sight of the teachings of Jesus Christ and make the Church an instrument of self-righteousness and racial superiority. Living as Jews did in a climate of deep insecurity in the first century, Jesus projected a dream that cut through the despair of his fellows – the kingdom of God is at hand, it is within.

Irving, writing eight decades later, traces her realization that systemic racism exists in this country, made up by the combination of skin color symbolism, favoritism and differential power to make decisions and/or distribute resources to people. Whites, she argues, are the only “race” that has the power to turn their perceived problems with people of other “racial groups” into policy, law and practice. As a result, Whites in America benefit both in tangible ways (easier to get jobs, access to resources, good neighborhoods) and intangible ways (sense of access, belonging and optimism). The only thing needed for racism to continue, she argues, is for good people to do nothing.

We closed the session with a Confession of Sin from the Episcopal Church’s Ministry for Racial Reconciliation. <https://liturgyandmusic.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/prayers-sclm-racial-reconciliation-and-justice-final1-3.pdf>

*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.*