

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, February 19, 2017  
The Rev. Bill Queen  
“Love Your Neighbor”  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:21-37

I had an interesting dilemma last week; I was scheduled to celebrate Communion at the Ladies’ Home, and that service typically uses the Gospel reading from the previous Sunday, on which I would preach a short homily; you may recall that last Sunday’s Gospel topics were adultery, lust, divorce, and plucking out your eye if you sin; somehow those just didn’t seem to be the most appropriate topics for that congregation, for the Ladies’ Home residents

so, since the service was being held on Valentine’s Day, St Valentine’s Day to be exact, I searched and found a collect about love to use in the service, and selected verses from 1st John ch. 4 to preach on; verses where it states that “God is love” and “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also;” that was certainly more appropriate, and I think they appreciated the connection I made between our faith and the otherwise largely secular observance of Valentine’s Day

if you think about it, of course there should be a St Valentine’s Day service; it is the perfect day to remind us about that best kind of love, the kind of love that God showers upon us, the kind of love which teaches us how to love other people--selflessly; the church should take advantage of an opportunity to speak about the religious significance of something as important as love, of something that people might not otherwise, especially on a highly romanticized Valentine’s Day, find any religious significance in

that experience got me to thinking about other times during the year when we have a holiday or widely recognized public observance which our church may not recognize; what other observances might our church be missing out on?; well the obvious one that came to my mind is the observance we are in the middle of right now--can anyone name it for us? (hint, February, all month long): Black History Month

if you think about it, of course there should be some kind of church observance of Black History Month; it is the perfect time to remember that the Bible has a lot to say about how all people and all races are related to each other--as all being

children of God; the church should take advantage of an opportunity to speak about the religious significance of something as important as African-American history which, I hope it is obvious for me to state, is not about history that only matters to Black people, but is about history that matters to all of us; this is something we need to attend to, especially in this highly polarized time of race relations we find ourselves in; and especially in a town such as Petersburg, which is going to need all of its citizens working well together to meet the challenges we face; it can only help us to be more aware of the religious significance, for us, of our shared history

more than this just being an idea about recognizing an observance--it is equally an idea about recognizing Biblical commandments; as we heard from the Valentine's Day reading about loving our brothers and sisters; and as we see in our Leviticus reading today, where we hear the Lord telling Moses to "love your neighbor as yourself"; this is an idea which Jesus extends and enlarges upon in our Matthew reading today; you've heard me say before, from this pulpit, that the word 'love,' in its biblical use, is always an action word, not just a state of feelings or emotions; so in order to love our neighbors as ourselves we have to do certain things with our neighbors and act certain ways with our neighbors--all of our neighbors

it is too late in the month to schedule some new activity here for Christ and Grace to recognize and celebrate Black History month, but that is certainly something I'm going to recommend that your new Rector consider for next year; but even if we don't do anything as a parish this year, that doesn't mean there aren't things that we can do personally to not let this important observance slip by unnoticed or unrecognized

a quick look online will show you lots of opportunities to learn about and celebrate Black History Month; the Petersburg Visitors Center has one brochure for a self-guided walking tour of 28 sites just in Old Towne Petersburg tied to significant African-American history and to the Underground Railroad; there is the Pocahontas Island Black History Museum; there is the Black History Museum & Cultural Center in Richmond; and there are, throughout the rest of the month, exhibits, activities, and lectures in many churches, schools, museums, and libraries in the area

in the announcements in your bulletin I've put a link to the Episcopal Church archives' collection about African-American Episcopalians and churches;  
[http://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican\\_history/exhibit/](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/)

some of the Episcopal Church's important history happened right here in Petersburg; the archives include St Stephen's Petersburg as one of the earliest African-American Episcopal parishes, and the Bishop Payne Divinity School associated with it; this was a seminary that trained Black Episcopal priests for 71 years before it merged with the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria; you can see its historic marker in the 400 block of S West St

one thing that I'm doing for Black History Month is reading a book by Ben Campbell, the former Director of the Richmond Hill Retreat Center, and a person who has done much to improve interracial understanding in the larger Richmond Metro area; his book *Richmond's Unhealed History* has truly opened my eyes to some very sad and shameful history, which I had little knowledge of before

at the Downtown Churches United meeting last week I had the opportunity to sit across the table from and get to know a 90 year-old member of St Stephen's Episcopal Church; he was a veteran of three wars and in the administration of VSU; we really hit it off when we discovered our connection of having both been born and raised in Jacksonville FL; he gave me a copy of his autobiography, and I will be learning more from his personal take on experiences as an African-American in the military and in higher education from it; during the meeting he reminded the group that one of the main reasons Downtown Churches United was founded back in 1969 (by Boston Lackey of Christ & Grace along with nine other churches) was not just to help out people in need, but also to bring black and white people together who would not otherwise get to meet or to know each other; and he urged the group not to forget the important need for that still today

of course, the importance of African-American history will not end on the last day of February; so I encourage any of you who, like I do, need to learn more about the history that all of us have inherited, to keep doing so; learning about African-American history is one way to understand our interconnections and to keep learning how to love our neighbor as ourself; learning about our shared history is one way to start seeing how all of our lives, which have been so closely bound to each other in the past, depend upon each other for our future together