

MY REFLECTION: We are THEN and NOW
BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2016: St. Benedict Catholic Church

Presented by...

Mr. Ray Leon

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Before I begin my homily to all of you, let me first admit that from time to time, and it can happen at the most inopportune times during my words, I may just blurt out, "God is Good", and because we are all creatures of habit, your response of "All the Time" would only enlighten, strengthen, and encourage the fact that He is present with us here today.....so as a reminder..."God is Good"

I want to first and foremost thank my Saint Benedict Family for allowing me to deliver this weekend's homily. I am truly humbled, and it goes without saying that without the support and leadership of Pastor Jayson Lendeza, Dionne Cola, Julie Hadnot, Harry Santi , Deacon Ron Tutson, and others that have graced this podium, the courage to deliver the message this weekend would not be possible.

Now if many of you are like me, hearing the homily on any given weekend or Sunday, usually leaves many of us with the question of " what did we just learn, or what did we just hear", and for me the question always remains, "how long will this message resonate with me and my faith in God". You see, and especially on this "Super Bowl Sunday" weekend, I want to deliver a message that many, if not most of you, can huddle around the water cooler or coffee machine on Monday morning, and, instead of directing the conversation around how many touchdowns were tossed at the Super Bowl, or which commercials seemed to have the most appeal, or was the halftime show really what it was hyped up to be, I want you to say on Monday morning and all the way through next Sunday, that the message here today was so much more important to discuss and to share with your co-workers, your friends, and your families. When you walk out of these hallowed doors, the message today, and on any given Sunday, should stick to your heart, your souls, and your minds, at least until the next Sunday, when that day's homilist delivers his or her message. Then, and only then, can we acclaim to hearing and sharing God's words and accepting his love in all that we do. Simply because..."God is Good...."

Now that this is out of the way, let me say to all of you who are celebrating and embracing the festivities here in the Bay Area, known as Super Bowl Sunday, let me just say the EVERY Sunday, in this house is SUPER SUNDAY and Super Weekend. At this weekend's services there will be no interruptions in the House of Saint Benedict's Church (not to be confused with Levi Stadium)...you will not see 12 Clydesdales horses pulling cases and cases of Budweiser beer, for 3 million dollars per 30 second commercials here today, nor will you witness men, women and children guzzling Pepsi's and Coca Colas to entice you to purchase them. There will be no halftime performance by Coldplay, Beyonce Knowles & Bruno Mars, although we will today, and all weekend, hear the heavenly sounds of Leonard Pete and the men, women and children of the Saint Benedict's choir....there will be no passing around the nachos', the Corona's, nor the guacamole dip and chips ...and most of all, there will be no "dabbing" at this weekend's service.

There will be, however, the miracle of receiving the Body and Blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and trust me, that will nourish your body and your soul. You see, for this Super weekend, the only coach that we will listen to is the greatest coach of all time...our Lord, Jesus Christ, and his team will be the celebrants in our services, and the homilists before you (and if you saw my sister Reese's Facebook, the "homeless" one being me), and surprisingly enough, your ticket to these hallowed grounds, and not Levi Stadium, will not be bought and sold on StubHub, Ticketmaster, or NFL.com....and the price of the ticket is your faith. There will be a message today for all of us. For "God is Good."

In keeping with the duties at hand, and as we celebrate the month of February and, of course, Black History month, the theme that is being repeated throughout the month of February is THEN and NOW. But let me remind all of you that the history of all African American's are not limited to 28 days of the year, and in this case, the 29 days in the year 2016. In fact, celebrating our history happens 365 days of the year, and so I propose the question to all of you here today, what happens in the remaining 336 days this year? Do we just suddenly wake up on February 1st, with our digital alarms, and computer reminders, and suddenly bellow out "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud"?

We have, in our modern times, adopted to the times and reminders of catch phrases and slogans, and since God only knows when, we have gone from “Oh Happy Day”, to “I Have a Dream” to “Black Power”, to “Keep Hope Alive”, to “Black Lives Matter”, and, while I believe that we should and could evolve around the notion of all recognizing all races, creeds and religions around our world, shouldn't the question be “why aren't we celebrating all of our fellow Christians and fellow neighbors for their heritage as well, throughout the entire year?” Diversity is not about how we differ. Diversity is about embracing one another's uniqueness. Laundry is the only thing that should be separated by color. Just food for thought, for as true Christians, God taught us to love ALL of our Brothers and Sisters. But yet, today, I will, as promised, stick to my heritage and celebrate the richness and culture of our African American Heritage. When I reflect on my church and my African American History, what comes to mind for me, in our communities today is the Word of our Lord and Savior, and the richness of the African American Catholic Church. For as Maya Angelou once said, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again”.

For you see, throughout our history, and for every February that rolls around, we automatically remember the names of Martin Luther King (whose leadership resulted in the end of legalized segregation around the country and, in which his work, also helped to create the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, and in 1964, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize), and Malcom X (who, as the key figurehead of the Nation of Islam in the 50's and 60's, saw his organization grow from a couple hundred followers to more than 40,000 and was known as a great speaker who told blacks that they should fight racism “by any means necessary.”) , and Frederick Douglass (a former slave who became a popular anti-slavery speaker, who wrote an autobiography that became a bestseller in the U.S. and, additionally, became a supporter of woman's rights, and later became the first black man to be appointed to positions of political power, and interestingly enough was also was put on the Equal Rights Party ticket as vice presidential candidate without his agreement, which made him the first African American to be on the presidential ballot,) , and Harriett Tubman (who was originally named Araminta Harriet Ross, whose work with the Underground Railroad nicknamed “Minty” and “Moses,” saved hundreds of thousands of African-Americans from

slavery,) , and Thurgood Marshall (the first black justice on the Supreme Court, who graduated with a law degree from Howard University, then represented the NAACP to work for equality for African-Americans, and ultimately argued the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and won), and , Sojourner Truth (who was originally named Isabella Baumfree, and was the first black person to successfully take a white man to court and win, with the result of the case being the return of her son who was illegally sold and sent to Alabama) , and Medgar Evers, (who fought for African-American rights throughout his life, worked on voter registration, organized boycotts and demonstrations and helped to investigate crimes committed against African-Americans, and held the position of state field secretary for the NAACP in the state of Mississippi), and Booker T. Washington (who was known for being a great speaker, educator, author and presidential advisor, and, after emancipation, became the voice for former slaves and other African-Americans who were being discriminated against in the Southern states, and pushed for economic advancement and better education in the community), and George Washington Carver (a famous inventor and scientist, who coined the “crop rotation method”), and W.E.B. Dubois (who was an influential black rights activist and leader, and notable scholar who studied at Harvard, and was the very first black individual to earn their doctorate from Harvard University), and Rosa Parks (who, while refusing to give up her seat on the bus for a white rider, on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, resulted in a boycott in the city, and because of this boycott the city was essentially forced to get rid of the law that allowed for segregation on the buses), and throughout these 29 days, we are constantly reminded of their contributions, as well as so many more to advancing the movements of African Americans in this society and the many sacrifices that these amazing humans made to better our modern day lives. In the words of Booker T. Washington, “Let us keep before us the fact that, almost without exception, every race or nation that has ever got up on its feet, has done so through struggle and trial and persecution; and that out of this very resistance to wrong, out of the struggle against odds, they have gained strength, self-confidence, and experience which they could not have gained in any other way.

But as we so proudly display our forefathers and matriarchal heroes, I challenge each and every one of you to just as proudly create and recognize our own pioneers of the modern day African American heritage. For you see, your name doesn't have to be Malcolm, or Martin, or Rosa Parks to be a part of the struggle for advancement or pride. Your name could simply be Mr. Jones or Mrs. Smith, who rises every day to provide for their families and for their communities and neighborhoods, and who THANKS GOD for every rising moment and for another blessed day. "God is Good".

We need to be the agents of change. What if Dr. King waited on the "Next Dr. King"? Or, what if, Rosa Parks just felt like standing on the bus that memorable day? It wasn't about a movement for Rosa Parks, she just simply wanted to sit down on the bus. We have been so accustomed to seeing everyday on the television or on the news the reported success of athletes and entertainers, who, with their millions of dollars, numerous cars and homes, the notoriety and fans and accolades say, first and foremost "I want to thank God", for the many blessings, which, can become quite easy and simple when worldly possessions are at your feet. But what about that simple hard working man, woman or child who also says, first and foremost, "I want to Thank God" for simply blessing me with another day, or allowing me to provide for my family? Shouldn't we be celebrating this humble servant of God just as much? Father Jayson related a story not too long ago, (yeah, Father, I paid attention), about dining at a restaurant, and after feeling a sensation of choking, said, and I repeat, "Thank God", which in my mind was so much more powerful than thanking Him for the level of success that we all sometimes adhere to.

So, in keeping with celebrating Then and Now in our African American History, you could be that single African American mother, who consistently works two jobs to provide for her kids, or the devoted and dedicated husband and father, who makes absolutely sure, day in and day out, that the lights are on for his family, and that there is food on the table for nourishment for his children, his friends, and sometimes his neighbors, without ever a single complaint or discouraging word. For you see, these every day, hardworking African American men and women are also TRUE HEROES, who are often times overlooked. Their goal and their mission is to make the right choices and to follow in God's word for a better household, a better community, a better neighborhood, and a better world. "God is Good....."

They reside in our neighborhood, and sing praises in our Church, (and for those who are visitors today, these names may not mean as much to you, but trust me, in this Church, these names carry as much History and Pride as you will ever witness), as proven by men such as Mr. Rufus Fisher, Mr. Watson, Mr. Morris Soublet, Mr. Nate Borner, Mr. Morris Larry, Mr. John Evans, Mr. Felix Guillory, Mr. Andrew Carrier, Mr. Conella Edgerly, Mr. Leo Galloway, Mr. Henry Royal, Sr., Mr. Claudell Leon, Mr. Marvin Millet, Mr. Harry Santi (who remains our “honorary African American brother), Deacon Ron Tutson, and of course Father Jayson Lendeza, (via our African American-Hawaiian brother), and Father Jay Mathews, who in their own way have made history here at Saint Benedict’s Then and Now, as well as our Brothers who have gone on before us, who blazed a trail and history in their own rights (men like Mr. Martin, and Mr. Trevigne)and I would be remiss, if I didn’t mention, what I consider our own three “wise men” Jorge Watson, Rueben Flores, and Sidney Fernandes, and of course our own “she roes” such as Ms. Gladys Green, Ms. Geraldine August, Ms. Evans, Ms. Dion Cola, Ms. Cookie and Julie Hadnot, Ms. Reese Fernandes, Ms. Kathy Martin, Ms. Sadie Leon, Ms. Beverly Broussard, Ms. Beverly Irvin, Ms. Elrita Larry, Ms. Devina Cabrera, Ms. Cindy MacIntyre, Ms. Linda Palmari, and Ms. Chiquita Tuttle (yes, Mother and Daughter), Ms. Dee Millet, Ms. Barbara Foster, Ms. Ruth Keys, Ms. Jackie LaFitte Tutson, and Ms. Ruth Keys, Ms. Ophelia Wanzo, and so many more that gather in the House of Saint Benedict’s.

And let’s not forget our young men and women of our Saint Benedict’s family who, in their own rights are creating a heritage and history that we can all be so proud of. Young men like Dorgan McDade, who’s homily of last week made us all reflect on how proud that all of us have become to watch this young man carry the words of so many young members of this parish, or Brianna Morris, who, like so many, have changed the stereotype of young African American children adhering to the ways of some of their peers, and Lalani, Michael, Joseph Canago, Romel Lucas, Ariana Catherine, Jakia Parker, Jennifer Fernandes, and of course, our own Leonard Pete, and the men and women of the Saint Benedict’s choir, who have more often than not, have turned this church into the “Saint Benedict’s Church of Christ, by the Side of the Road, AME, Baptist, Methodist, Church of 82nd Avenue.” These are the young trailblazers of our rich African American culture in our Catholic home that reminds us that the future is bright.....and not just in the month of February....It is found in Isaiah Chapter II:Verse 6, where Isaiah simply, but profoundly, said, "That a little child shall lead them."

These are the men, women, and children of our Saint Benedicts' family (and if I have forgotten some of the names of our History makers who make a difference in our Church, please forgive me, it was not intentional) who are re-creating our Black History, with the notion of making our neighborhoods safe, our households full of love and honor, and who take the time to love and spread God's word through our community. Now, I may drill deep into some, and with all respect, this usually applies to most, but sometimes "standing in the House of God doesn't always make you a Christian, just like standing in your own garage, won't make you a Mercedes Benz", but in this House of Saint Benedicts, there are history makers and Christians that are fighting every day to become fishers of men and women.

In our gospel today, Luke points out yet another miracle as witnessed by Simon Peter, and by James and John of Zebedee, as we see the miracle of Jesus as he watches the fisherman whose nets are besieged with emptiness. But we as Christians and followers realize that this miracle wasn't just about the nourishment that was provided for them in the forms of fish for food...but more importantly, they had become "fishers of men". When Jesus says to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men", and immediately they brought their boats to shore and followed him". As I look around this House of Saint Benedict's Church, I simply ask the question, aren't we, too, fishers of men and women, where we can cast our own nets to reach our neighbors and friends and to encourage them to attend our church, to hear the word of God and to embrace His love, His spirit, His forgiveness, and most of all, His grace? Each one teach one, Each one try to reach one.....that is our challenge...to put church and God back in our communities...as the old commercials of an older time used to say..."tell a friend"....There was a time when attending a Mass here at Saint Benedict's Church became an ordeal JUST to find a seat. Yes it was that crowded. So as we continue to repeat "Then and Now"....let's, at the very least, get back to THEN. It should not be so very hard to find our way back to Church and to encourage your family and friends to do the same.

With modern technology these days, just simply tell them to program their GPS systems and follow these directions....make a right turn at Faith, a left at Truth, in one hundred feet, turn slightly left at Forgiveness, and keep straight for 100 yards to Love. And just like that adorable voice on your GPS System, it will remind you that you have reached your destination....the House of God.

In Corinthians, our second reading today, as well as Isaiah in the first reading, we are reminded of also the gospel that was preached to us and by which we stand and through it we are all being saved...if you hold fast to the word". This serves as the message of forgiveness as we question whether we are fit to be an apostle of God, but He teaches us that even a man of unclean lips, and living among a people of unclean lips when, touched by the seraphim's ember, that they too shall be cleansed of their wickedness and sins are purged..." a true lesson in forgiveness, and one that can be just as adaptable in our everyday lives. Yes, we remember and we recall throughout the hardships of our African American History, and the sacrifices that were made by those who were persecuted and ridiculed for simply attempting to change inconceivable wrongs, but Jesus himself, has taught us that forgiveness is the true gift.

So we carry on the legacies and dreams of our heroes and "sheroes" in time, and continue to create simply new historic moments of change. We lead by example and faith.

As I close today, I am reminded of a sermon that was spoken by Rev. Amiri B Hooker, A Senior Pastor at Lake City Circuit UMC, in South Carolina, when asked about the purpose of dealing with self-pride and the Love that God has for all races and people around the world, he simply said:
Women and men of all colors must know that they are made in God's image, that Jesus Christ died to redeem them, and that if they believe, He will be theirs and they will be His.

Like Hagar,: We need to know that God is ever-ready to hear

Like Zipporah: We need to use all Our gifts and knowledge of survival to help others

Like Jethro:, We need to use Our gifts of teaching

Like Hobab:, We need to be willing to help guide those in need

Like the beautiful black women of the Song of Songs: , We need to love chastely with all-out commitment to our beloved.

Like the men and women of Antioch: , we need to go and give and pray...we all need to be a transforming influence for Jesus Christ.

Enjoy your Super Bowl Weekend.....and as someone once said to me, God Truly has a sense of humor on this day.....he must because he is both a Raiders and 49ers Fan.....God is Good....

Amen