

Preparation for Holding History (November theme)

“Holding History” is our church’s theme for November. But what does it mean? We are accustomed to studying history, celebrating it, questioning it. One way to explore “holding history” is to consider the phrase “holding space.” The term, originally from therapy, describes mindful attention to another person. When we hold space for a person, we listen and honor their experience without judging. We accept our own discomfort as we witness their pain. It’s the kind of listening we do in covenant groups.

“Holding history” begins with paying attention. In school, we may have learned “official stories” about the past – that colonial settlement and westward expansion were heroic efforts, or that the Civil War was a noble quest for states’ rights. Those stories, however, hid difficult truths – that millions of Natives died or were displaced, and that the Southern economy was based on cruel slavery. We can also pay attention to the untold histories of other groups – immigrants of many ethnicities, women, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, many others.

When we listen to a person’s suffering, it can be uncomfortable. Learning about the past can be very painful for those whose ancestors suffered. It may also be uncomfortable for those who have benefitted from past injustices or who benefit from current privilege. Some would prefer to avoid discomfort, and have focused on controlling how history is taught in schools. A Tennessee law makes it illegal to teach history in a way that students might “feel discomfort, guilt, ... [or] psychological distress.” But it is important to understand that guilt and discomfort are not the same. It is appropriate to feel discomfort about history. We can still honor our ancestors’ courage and contributions. Our children can learn history with both pride and discomfort.

Holding space means listening to a person’s experience. From history, too, we want not just events but a sense of people’s lives in the past. If we know our ancestry and have access to research, we often find that documents – photographs, letters, obituaries – offer meaningful glimpses into past lives. For groups who were oppressed in the past, however, those documents may not be available. Archives typically record the dominant culture. Many groups – enslaved, gay, institutionalized, other groups – could not write their stories, or perhaps could not write their true stories. For more recent history, we can look to preserve memory. Christine Diindiisi McCleave says the truth about Indian schools is “not only truth from the federal government ... and the churches that ran the schools, but also hearing the truth from the perspective of the people who experienced it, listening to the testimony of survivors and descendants.” And when there are no records or memory has been lost in generations, the truth of past experience may require imagination. Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* was inspired by a newspaper clipping. Fiction can help us create a sense of history and hold it vividly in our hearts.

Holding space means mindfully staying in the present. Historical awareness can help us see the present more clearly. As James Baldwin said, “we carry our history with us.” If we reflect on the history we have lived through, we can see how those events and values have influenced both ourselves and our society. The past has created the very structures in which we live. Many injustices of history are “hardened” into our society – in housing, education, healthcare, employment, justice and incarceration, and other social systems.

Holding history is a project for individuals and for our society. We can discover more about the past. We can accept discomfort as we learn more perspectives, even as we maintain our pride in our country and our ancestors. We can look to hold the past in our thoughts and in our hearts. As we work through this complicated process, we may be moved to understand both the past and the present more deeply and work to change the consequences of historical injustice.

Consider the following quotes as you reflect on what holding history means for you.

I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it.
Saidiya Hartman

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over ... We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner ... The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect man and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth. *W. E. B. Du Bois*

We can honour early settlers while contextualizing the particular policies that made that settlement possible. It takes nothing away from anyone's ancestors to tell the whole story. *Michael Cappello*

Full citizenship was ... predicated on keeping 'unacceptable' behavior private. This complicated relationship between the public and private is at the heart of LGBT history and life today.
Michael Bronski

How can our disabled ancestors rest in peace when many ... did not have the opportunity to talk openly or act creatively with their disabilities in an open and free environment? *Leroy F. Moore, Jr.*

Many of our ancestors were both the colonizers and the colonized. We embody immensely conflicting cultures. *Dolores Delgado Bernal*

There is an ancient Indian saying that something lives only as long as the last person who remembers it. My people have come to trust memory over history. Memory, like fire, is radiant and immutable while history serves only those who seek to control it, those who douse the flame of memory in order to put out the dangerous fire of truth. Beware these men ... Their false history is written in the blood of those who might remember and of those who seek the truth. *Floyd Red Crow Westerman*

Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. *Luvvie Ajayi Jones*

Questions to Ponder

1. What about history do you now see differently from the way you were taught as a child?
2. What history would you like to learn more about?
3. As a society, we are expanding our view of history to include the experiences and perspectives of many groups. What might be uncomfortable for you in this process? How might your thoughts and feelings be included in the community conversation?
4. Reflect on a period of history that you lived through. How did it influence the person you became? How do you see that time in history now?
5. You may or may not know about your ancestry. Thinking about a possible ancestor's actual life, however, is a project for imagination. What might you imagine about an ancestor's experiences?

Words of the Day

Before the Gathering, reflect on history that troubles you and history that you would like to learn more about. The Words of the Day sentence is "I would like to learn more about the history of ..."