

Black History Month
“Giving Credit Where Credit is Overdue: Why We Need Black History Month”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
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All week long, I’ve been really wishing I didn’t have to write this sermon. OK, to be honest, there have been many times when I wish I didn’t have to write a sermon! You know, the usual avoidance thing. I know it’s going to be hard work and I’ll have to wrestle with ideas, words, my own thoughts and beliefs and understandings, and distill it all down into 15 or 20 minutes of something coherent that I hope will be meaningful to at least some of the people who hear me. Once I sit down and start, it’s still hard, but I know I’ll get through it. I always do.

But that’s not what I meant when I said I was wishing I didn’t have to write THIS sermon. What I meant was, I was wishing there was no NEED to write a sermon that spoke about Black History Month and/or some of the many accomplishments and contributions African Americans have made to our US history and society. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became.

Why do we need a Black History Month? To say, “see, black people ARE as smart as white people!”? Is it an attempt to right past wrongs? To fill in past omissions?

I could tell you about George Washington Carver, and you’d say, “Oh, yes, the peanut guy.” That’s right. He experimented with new uses for peanuts, sweet potatoes, soybeans, pecans and other crops. Carver deserves to be remembered for these and many other contributions.

I could tell you about other black inventors, like Doctor Patricia Bath, an ophthalmologist who was the first African American female doctor to patent a medical invention. She transformed eye surgery by developing a method for removing cataracts using a laser device. I could tell you about important black educators like Booker T. Washington who founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881 and oversaw its growth into a well-respected black university.

I could stand here and talk all day about African American scientists, political leaders, activists, authors, entertainers, musicians and singers. And athletes! Some of these people are household names and some of them, most people, black or white, have never even heard of. And that's a shame.

But I'm not going to stand here all day talking. I don't want to do that, and neither do you!

There's a cartoon that shows a white, male teacher standing in front of the classroom. On the blackboard behind him, it says, "US History." A student has his hand up, and the teacher is saying, "No, Charles. You'll find the abolitionist movement, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. du Bois ("BOYZ") and civil rights in the Black Studies Department. This is US History."

As we know, history is usually taught from the perspective of those in power. And traditionally, it has been white American men who have written American history, although that is starting to change.

It would be impossible for me to convey to you the millions of accomplishments and contributions made to American society by people of African American descent. And so I'm not even going to try. It's up to each of us to educate ourselves about the lives and works of as many of these bright and talented people as we can.

The biggest reason we need to educate ourselves is racism. Racism is the ongoing legacy of the enslavement of African Americans in this country. Not being informed about the reality of a people's history, about the horrors of slavery as well as the many reasons to celebrate individual African Americans, is one of the many faces of racism. "I don't know about it, so I assume it doesn't exist." Whatever our race, this lack of awareness and appreciation is the racism of ignorance. For those of us who identify as African American, though, it's racism that has been internalized. Internalized racism is the taking on of the feeling of being "less than" which is learned from the larger society.

You can see a powerful example of internalized racism in a video on the Internet, in which a researcher sets two dolls on a table. One is a white doll and the other is a black doll. The researcher then asks a 4-year-old African American girl a series

of questions. Which is the pretty doll? (The child points to the white doll.) Which is the nice doll? (She points to the white doll.) Why is the doll nice? (Because she's white.) Which doll is the ugly doll? (She points to the black doll; her bright face starts to falter.) Which doll looks most like you? (She hesitates, her expression clearly changes to a troubled one and then she points to the black doll.)

The original experiment was devised in the 1940s by African American psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, to study internalized racism among students in segregated schools versus in integrated ones. The Clarks found that internalized racism was more acute among students who attended segregated schools. They testified as expert witnesses in *Briggs vs. Elliott*, one of the cases rolled into *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954).

The Clarks' work contributed to the ruling of the US Supreme Court in which it determined that racial segregation in public education was unconstitutional. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in the *Brown vs. Board* opinion, "To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone."

As a black man, Carter G. Woodson understood internalized racism. He came to believe that the best way to overcome it was to change black people's perceptions of themselves. And the best way to change those perceptions was through education about black history and achievements. During the summer of 1915, Carter G. Woodson traveled from Washington, D.C. to Chicago to participate in a national celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation.

Thousands of African Americans travelled from across the country to see exhibits highlighting the progress their people had made since the ending of slavery. Woodson, who held a doctorate from Harvard, joined the other exhibitors with a black history display. Despite being held at the Coliseum, where thousands were gathered inside, an overflow crowd of six to twelve thousand people waited outside for their turn to view the exhibits.

Woodson was inspired by the three-week celebration, and while he was in Chicago, he decided to form an organization to promote the scientific study of black life and history. Since he was an alumnus of the University of Chicago, he

had a lot of connections. On September 9th, Woodson and several other black historians formed the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH).

He hoped that others would popularize the findings that he and other black intellectuals would publish in *The Journal of Negro History*, which he established the following year. Woodson began urging black civic organizations to promote the achievements that researchers were uncovering. He worked with his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, to create Negro Achievement Week. Their outreach was significant, but Woodson wanted greater impact. As he told an audience of Hampton Institute students, “We are going back to that beautiful history and it is going to inspire us to greater achievements.” In 1925, he decided that the Association had to shoulder the responsibility. Going forward, the mission would be both to uncover *and* popularize knowledge about the black past. He sent out a press release announcing Negro History Week in February, 1926.

Woodson chose February for reasons of tradition. He built Negro History Week around traditional days of commemorating the black past. Since Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, the black community had been celebrating his birthday. And since the late 1890s, black communities across the country had been celebrating Frederick Douglass’ birthday, also in February.

Yet Woodson was up to something more than building on tradition. He envisioned the study and celebration of the Negro as a race. Rather than focusing on two men, the black community, he believed, should focus on the countless black men and women who had contributed to the advance of human civilization. In this way, he believed, he could transform internalized racism into racial pride.

From the beginning, Woodson was overwhelmed by the response to his call. Negro History Week appeared across the country in schools and before the public. Black history clubs sprang up, teachers demanded materials to instruct their pupils, and progressive whites stepped up and endorsed the efforts.

Woodson and the Association scrambled to meet the demand. They set a theme for the annual celebration, and provided study materials—pictures, lessons for teachers, plays for historical performances, and posters of important dates and people. Provided with a steady flow of knowledge, high schools in progressive communities formed Negro History Clubs. To serve the desire of so many to participate in the re-education of black folks and the nation, the Association for

the Study of Negro Life and History formed branches across the country. In 1937, Woodson established the Negro History Bulletin, which focused on the annual theme. As black populations grew, mayors issued Negro History Week proclamations, and in cities like Syracuse, progressive whites joined Negro History Week with National Brotherhood Week.

Like most ideas that resonate with the spirit of the times, Negro History Week proved to be more dynamic than Woodson or the Association could control. By the 1930s, Woodson complained about the intellectual charlatans, black and white, popping up everywhere, seeking to take advantage of the public interest in black history. He warned teachers not to invite speakers who had less knowledge than the students themselves. Publishing houses that had previously ignored black topics and authors rushed to put books on the market and in the schools. Instant experts appeared everywhere along with non-scholarly works. And so Woodson, the constant reformer, had his hands full in trying to promote celebrations worthy of the people who had made the history.

Woodson pressed for schools to use Negro History Week to demonstrate what students learned all year. In the same vein, he established a black studies extension program to reach adults throughout the year. In the 1940s, efforts began slowly within the black community to expand the study of black history in the schools and black history celebrations before the public.

In the South, black teachers often taught Negro History as a supplement to United States history. One early beneficiary of the movement reported that his teacher would hide Woodson's textbook beneath his desk to avoid drawing the wrath of the principal. During the Civil Rights Movement in the South, the Freedom Schools incorporated black history into the curriculum to advance social change. The Negro History movement was an intellectual insurgency that was part of every larger effort to transform race relations.

By the late 1960s, as young blacks on college campuses became increasingly conscious of links with Africa, Black History Month replaced Negro History Week. In 1976, fifty years after the first celebration, the Association used its influence to institutionalize the shifts from a week to a month and from Negro history to black history. Since the mid-1970s, every American president has issued proclamations endorsing the Association's annual theme.

Woodson believed that black history was too important to America and the world to be crammed into a limited time frame. His goal was that blacks would learn of their past on a daily basis, and he looked forward to a time when an annual celebration would no longer be necessary.

We, all of us in this country, owe so much to Carter G. Woodson and all the others who helped create greater awareness of African American history. The day has not yet come when we don't need the annual reminder of Black History month. If you have a chance this month, I commend to you the African American Museum in Philadelphia, which is hosting the premier exhibition of Black History Month's celebration. This year's theme is Civil Rights in America. (As an aside, a number of years ago, the company I was working for suddenly wanted me to go to Europe on business, and I had to get a passport. You can go to the Philadelphia Consulate and get it in one day. So I went in, submitted my application and had to wait to pick up the passport at the end of the day. I walked two blocks over to the African American museum and spent the entire day there! There really is a lot to see. I learned so much.) Or go to your local library. Browse the Internet. I urge you to take some time to learn more about the history of people of African descent in this country. There is much to celebrate. I also encourage you to expand your understanding of the uglier parts of our African American history: slavery, racism and the struggle for human rights.

As we mentioned earlier, Pete Seeger died last week. Now, here's an interesting connection. On September 2, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Part of the school's mission was to help prepare civil rights workers to challenge unjust laws and racist policies that discriminated against African Americans. King himself, Rosa Parks and other members of the Southern Leadership Conference trained there. Dr. King delivered the main speech that day, honoring the school's 25th anniversary. As part of the meeting, folk singer Pete Seeger got up with his banjo. He plucked out a song he had learned at Highlander, and led the audience in singing it.

Later that day, Dr. King found himself humming the tune in the car. "There's something about that song that haunts you," he said to his companions.

That song was "We Shall Overcome." "We'll Overcome" first appeared as a protest song during a 1945–1946 labor strike against American Tobacco in Charleston, South Carolina. African American women strikers, seeking a pay raise

to 30 cents an hour, sang as they picketed. "I Will Overcome" was a favorite gospel song of Lucille Simmons, one of the strikers. But she gave the song a powerful sense of solidarity by changing the "I" to "We" as they sang together.

In 1947, Simmons brought the song to Highlander Folk School and shared it with other labor activists there. Zilphia Horton, head of the school's cultural program, learned it and later taught it to Pete Seeger. Pete revised the lyrics "We will" to "We shall" and published the song.

And the rest, as they say, is history. The song was easy to learn and sing at civil rights protests such as sit-ins, marches, and rallies. "We Shall Overcome" became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I did not know this story when I chose our closing hymn. So, let's now join in singing, "We Shall Overcome."