

**Juneteenth –
Remarks by Linda Gray at the
Dedication and Blessing of Holy Trinity’s Plaque
Acknowledging the Parish’s History
of Segregation and Racism,
June 19, 2024**

Good Evening,

My name is Linda L. Gray and I am a member of Epiphany Catholic Church. My Great Grandmother was Mary Jane Thomas. She was a member of Holy Trinity and she is buried at Holy Rood Cemetery. She married Benjamin Williams. He was a member of Mt. Zion AME. They had 8 children, all baptized at Holy Trinity. The oldest was Dorothy Williams, my grandmother. My grandmother married Lester Harris, Sr. They raised 11 children at Epiphany Catholic Church. All of my life I knew that my grandmother, like other family members and former members of Epiphany who are here with us today, were founding members of Epiphany and pillars of the church. They built and created an environment where religious freedom was no longer questioned or challenged.

It is so meaningful that we celebrate the religious freedom of our Black ancestors on Juneteenth. It is significant to me personally because my knowledge of the real story was limited. I knew that the segregation and racial practices condoned by the Catholic Church were the reason Epiphany was built. I knew the mechanics of the story. I knew that Holy Trinity was a church we never thought about attending and that Black Catholics had no reason to be here. My Grandmother never discussed in detail what happened here. We were past it, had our own, and we thrived as a church community for decades. It’s quite normal to shield children from harsh realities.

A few years ago, I met Peter Albert and the members of the Social Justice Committee because they were involved in telling the story of Holy Trinity’s racial past. My mother shared information and documents, and we became involved in the project. Two years ago, my mother and I participated in the Pilgrimage. We visited Holy Rood Cemetery where some of my relatives are buried and then came to the church which was the first time I had ever stepped foot in Holy Trinity. I will not go into detail what that

experience was because everyone needs to have the experience, but it involves putting yourself in the moment of time when there was no religious freedom for Black parishioners.

I could only think of my grandmother, a pillar of Epiphany, and what she endured as a child and young adult at this church. It took me to a place where I felt anger, disgust, shame, and a moment of “what is so great about being Catholic?” I had some serious processing to do.

While I was processing all of that I realized that Father Kevin and the Social Justice Committee here had to go through the same emotions of anger, embarrassment, and shame to have the courage to expose the truth. This truth is ugly and painful.

That saying, the truth shall set you free – it does. The truth hurts – it does. But the truth also has the power to heal. In my processing this is where my healing begins, and I’m still healing.

Had I not learned the hidden truth of the treatment of Black Parishioners at Holy Trinity I would not have the new-found appreciation of the founding members of Epiphany. I see my grandmother in a whole new light. She was not just a pillar of the church. She and the other founding members were warriors. They had unwavering faith. These were the people who exemplified “We walk by faith and not by sight.” These are the people who stepped out on faith with no place to go. There was no church structure to move in to. It had to be built, and they had Mass wherever. (In homes, black-owned businesses in Georgetown, anywhere but here.) These are the people who believed that God would make a way out of no way. Their strength and resilience is a beautiful story that cannot be hidden, that must be told, and must be celebrated appropriately.

In 2016 we dedicated a plaque that recognized Epiphany as a church built by Blacks in order to worship freely. Former members of Epiphany celebrated with us. Our pastor was Monsignor Mosley. It was not considered a church moment by the entire congregation. The picture of the dedication shows one white person in the group picture. She was a co-benefactor of the plaque, along with my mother. A few stayed on the sidewalk, and in retrospect I know they were being respectful, thinking that this was a moment for the ancestors and their descendants. They did join us at the reception and

had a great time with our guests. However, most of the white parishioners walked out of church and walked away. It was embarrassing and disrespectful to our pastor who was Black, but it was also a realization and quite the reminder that most don't know anything about the history of Epiphany.

Over the years we have embraced other communities in our church. We would be hypocrites if we didn't. We enjoyed a French community for many years who always participated in our church bazaars. We have a Lithuanian community, and our most recent community to join is our Korean community. While all things change, institutional knowledge should never be lost.

The history of Epiphany should always be celebrated because it is a story of great faith. Next year Epiphany will celebrate its 100th Anniversary, and it is my hope that the story of resilience, strength, faith, and church community will be demonstrated throughout the year, and that Holy Trinity will be a part of our celebration.

Thank you for the invitation and for making the dedication of the plaque on Juneteenth. Thank you to the entire Social Justice Committee for all of the work, the research, and the time it has taken to create this day. This is another emotional moment but it is one of joy. Happy Juneteenth!