



ST. GEORGE'S  
SCHOOL

## Address by Head of School Alixe Callen **Black History Month**

*February 2018*

Good morning.

As you heard the Rev. Kirby say a few minutes ago, February is Black History Month. The notion of setting aside time to talk about the contributions of black Americans was originally put forth by the African-American historian Carter Woodson in the 1920's. He proposed that the second week of February, which coincides with the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, be set aside to recognize the achievements of blacks in our country. That practice of a weekly recognition continued for many years, up until 1976, when President Gerald Ford proclaimed the entire month of February black history month. As he said at the time, we as a country need to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history."

In February of 1976, I happened to be in kindergarten. I can recall with detail the activities we did each year in my elementary school classes – completing worksheets about the contributions of people like Carter Woodson, George Washington Carver, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes, Billie Holliday. Watching filmstrips, reading books and articles. I love this aspect of Black History month, this idea of celebrating the regularly overlooked achievements and contributions of black Americans – and it is something I try to do every year.

However, in addition to recognizing all of these incredibly important contributions, I think we have another responsibility during black history month – and that is to educate ourselves about the atrocities that African-Americans, and others who identify as black, have experienced over the past five centuries on this continent. If we want to talk about black history, we need to talk about the role slavery played in the evolution of our nation and its economy – both in the north and the south. That means looking beyond Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. It means examining what happened in our own communities. I am reading a book right now that examines the significant role Newport played in the slave trade. My interest in this topic came about after I spoke with a resident

who has discovered a photograph that includes a slave ship in Newport harbor. We also need to talk about how historically white institutions – including this one – discriminated against black Americans. Mrs. Simpson is working on a display from the archives that will be up in the library this week, looking at the introduction of black students to St. George's in the late 60's. I encourage you to look at this display carefully and reflect on what that experience must have been like for those brave students. We need to talk about the laws and policies that have been enacted over time to keep communities segregated. And for those of us who are white, we need to reflect on the privilege we have received as a result of our skin color.

I don't say any of this to somehow 'guilt' you. In fact, guilt will do us no good. Instead, I am asking that you educate yourselves, that during this month set aside to talk about black history, that we speak about the entirety of black history – both the parts that make us proud and the parts that make us cringe.

Over the course of this month, I'd like to encourage each of us to expand our knowledge of black history – to listen to the readings here in chapel, to read a book or even just an article, to talk to someone, to watch a movie – do something, learn something, even if it makes you uncomfortable.