

Celebrating God's Grace, Mercy and Love—February 2017

February is Black History Month—a time set aside to pay homage to those individuals whose shoulders we stand on. It's also a time to reflect on who we are and from whence we came. And, while there is an ongoing debate about setting aside just ONE month each year to honor Black history makers, each of us has the opportunity and privilege to delve deeper into our history as often as we like. Surely, we don't need to set aside a month to reflect on our history, but we can and should regard February as an opportunity to share our many and significant contributions to history with people of other races and ethnicities.

This month we also celebrate Valentine's Day, which, coincidentally, happens to be my birthday! So during this time each year I find myself not only reflecting upon Black History Month, but taking time to reflect upon my own life as I *celebrate the grace, mercy and love* that God has and continues to bestow upon me. As I reflect upon my personal journey, I am not ashamed to say that with each passing year, I continue to grow closer and closer to Christ, and fall deeper in love with Him.

During Black History Month, as we honor those who have made significant contributions to history, poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist Langston Hughes' poem, "*Life Ain't Been No Crystal Stair*" comes to mind. An old adage many of us grew up hearing from our grandparents, also rings true for me—'*I wouldn't take nothing for my journey.*' Over these past 55 years, I've experienced the lowest of valleys and the highest of heights, yet I know that God is not finished with me yet.

My journey—though unique to me—is no more or less significant or difficult than yours. As with our ancestors—*sometimes under the most harsh, degrading and inhumane circumstances*—with perseverance, prayer and patience, each of us can pursue our dreams, discover and fulfill our purpose in life, and live our lives to the fullest. Most times this pursuit comes at great cost—not just economically—but mentally, physically

and spiritually. Life, the pursuit of our dreams, living up to the expectations of others, and achieving our goals can take their toll on us—*if we let them!*

At Grove Church, this year we've adopted the theme of "*Emerging*" in an effort to become better and more deserving. But, what exactly does that mean? The definition of emerging is '*appearing; coming out of an experience, condition, or situation, especially a difficult one*'. A good analogy is the butterfly that *emerges* from a caterpillar or chrysalis (*a moth or butterfly pupa that is enclosed in a hardened, protective case*).

Many of us have heard some version of what occurs when a butterfly emerges prematurely from its cocoon. One account relates that a butterfly struggled so hard to get out of its cocoon that someone helped it along by making the hole bigger. This well-intended act of kindness resulted in the butterfly emerging prematurely; its body was swollen and its wings were shriveled. The butterfly never fully matured and ended up spending its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings, without ever being able to fly.

You see, a butterfly is SUPPOSED to emerge out of the cocoon on its own. The struggle to get through the tiny opening of the cocoon serves a purpose; it pushes the fluid out of its body and into its wings. Without the struggle, the butterfly's wings never develop fully to allow it to fly.

Similarly, our 'struggles' are an important part of our development process. Sometimes God does not take away or deliver us from the struggle because His answer is 'not yet.' We are *under construction*. We have not fully developed or matured to receive the blessings He has for us. We must learn to accept that when His response is 'not yet,' God is still with us; sustaining us and loving us in the midst of whatever we are going through.

Struggles, disappointments and trials help us grow, develop and blossom into the 'butterfly' God desires us to be. If we had no trials or struggles, if we had no pain, or suffered no losses, many of us would not be the strong, faithful or wise individuals that we have become. Experience and struggles—and yes, *even history*—have taught us

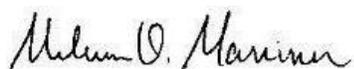
that we can endure and come out on the other side, bruised but not broken; scathed and scorned, but not hopeless. Life has taught us to suffer without surrendering. Maybe God didn't stop the pain, hurt, loss or tragedy, but He stayed with us *through it*. The knowledge, peace and comfort that He provides can and does strengthen and grow us closer in our relationship with Him.

Most of us that have emerged from some kind of struggle and, today, we can *celebrate God's grace, mercy and love*. We see His hand in our lives, and fully understand and embrace¹ Peter 5:10: "*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*"

While certainly we don't pray for 'struggles,' as we endure, mature *and emerge*, we come to understand that they are a part of life. We also come to appreciate that *we are 'more than conquerors.'* We come to know that *'those who are with Him, are more than those who are in the world.'*

During Black History Month, as we celebrate and commemorate *our roots*, and demonstrate our love to people in our lives that are important to us, let's also *celebrate God's grace, mercy and love*, and thank Him for the struggle! Let's wait on the Lord, so that when we EMERGE, we are mature, faithful, prayerful and grateful! In this season of emergence, let's embrace the words in Alicia Keys' song, "*Brand New Me*," as we wash off the dust of construction, demolish the darkness, and defeat the distortions of life to emerge into who and what God intended.

Peace and power,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melvin O. Marriner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pastor Marriner