



The Feast of Absalom Jones

A Sermon Preached by Katrina Browne

The Feast of Absalom Jones ~ February 14, 2010

John 15:12-15

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Good morning. It’s wonderful and of course a little surreal to be here after so many years in childhood in a pew with my parents looking up to this beautiful pulpit.

I’d like to start by taking you farther back.

Picture in your mind’s eye, a rococo organ over here in the North gallery. And the Penn family here in the South gallery with a canopy over their large pew (the second generation had rebelled and become Anglicans rather than Quakers). As these were considered the best box pews, other prominent members sat up here, including Robert Morris, John Cadwalader, George Clymer, Benjamin Wynkoop. And in the best boxes downstairs, the Powells, the Chews, and others. Merchants, generals, financiers, land owners, signers of historic documents.

Imagine being owned by these men. Imagine being required to come to their church and to sit here, to my left and right on benches. The area may have been open like it is now, or there may have been a screen to hide you. In either case your status was clear: you were either sitting under the watchful eye of your master, or being hidden from view. In either case: you can’t see the preacher, but you are clearly expected to listen.

Imagine hearing the Old Testament stories of the Israelites, weeping as they remembered Zion, then being led out of bondage in Egypt by Moses. Imagine hearing the words of Jesus: “I do not call you slaves any longer, but I have called you friends.”

Absalom Jones sat in these benches; his master was Benjamin Wynkoop. Imagine his strength of character. He was forced to attend, but he took the teachings to heart and became a true Christian. He was married here to a young woman who was also enslaved, Mary. He worked to buy her freedom first, so their children could be free. The American Revolution was swirling. He paid for his own freedom by age 38 in 1784. He founded the Free African Society with Richard Allen, probably the first of its kind, in 1787, in the midst of the Constitutional Convention. As free blacks, he and his compatriots worshipped at St. George’s Methodist Church. Upon being asked to start using a segregated gallery, they got up and left, en masse, and strengthened their resolve to form their own independent church. Richard Allen founded Mother Bethel, which would lead to the eventual founding of the A.M.E. denomination. Jones formed St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. This meant petitioning his former rector at St. Peter’s, now Bishop William White, for ordination and for recognition for the parish. In spite of resistance, he became the first black Episcopal priest in our denomination. Then the yellow fever epidemic hit, and Jones and Allen exhorted black Philadelphians to tend to the sick and bury the dead, to tend to white Philadelphians in this crisis, when no one else would. They wrote: “God who knows the hearts of all men, and the propensity of a slave to hate his oppressor hath strictly forbidden it to his chosen people.” They

were following the call to love their enemy, when arguably that love had hardly been earned.

Imagine all of this. Here. And within blocks of here.

God said to Moses: “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Allen and Jones were Moses figures. We are honored to honor Absalom Jones this morning for his feast day as a Saint in the Episcopal Church. He was dehumanized here, and he responded with love.

So what can we do to honor him in these days? To rise to his level? What would please him?

I won't ask you to remove your boots to touch this holy ground bare-foot this morning, though I'm tempted, but I will share this:

The Episcopal Church, as many of you know, passed resolutions at General Convention in 2006 and they were renewed this past summer. They ask Dioceses and parishes to reckon with the Church's history of complicity in slavery and its aftermath, and they ask us all to become “repairers of the breach.” The call is from Isaiah 58: to rebuild the ancient ruins, to raise up the foundations of many generations, to become the restorer of streets to live in.

I can't help but imagine that Absalom Jones would want us to take up this powerful call.

Now it's important to say that there's no “how to guide” for a process like this. So it's easy to hang back. But we know there is a breach. There are struggles and hardships faced by black families, black neighborhoods in Philadelphia that are life and death, that are heart-breaking, and that are not fair. They can be traced back in lines of cause and effect to the days of slavery and the days of intense racism and discrimination. And there is a breach in the relationship, an estrangement that persists, a deep lack of trust.

So how do we repair and rebuild?

The Episcopal resolutions call first for a study of the history, in detail. My sources tell me, OK, my mother tells me, in fact showed me, the history that she has compiled, with input from some of the church guides and from Leslie Potter, that shows the great extent to which early Anglicans and Episcopalians and members of this parish were invested in slavery. There's a summary in the current issue of *The Spire*, but I strongly encourage you to read the whole piece which will be on the website soon, or in the upcoming issue of *The View*, the Historic St. Peter's newsletter. If you haven't read Gary Nash's book *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community*, or seen the current exhibit at the African American Museum of Philadelphia called *Audacious Freedom*, I recommend those as well.

We often think we know the history of slavery and the moral of the story. But the process of learning my Northern family's slave trading history led to one revelation after another all of which profoundly altered my sense of the past and the present. For example, I learned that what kept slavery in place was not just those at the top of the ladder—the slave traders, the merchants, the slave owners—but also the consumers. It was the everyday purchases of cotton cloth and sugar and coffee and tobacco that kept the wheels in motion as well. So slavery built the nation, not just the South, and not just the rich. I even had to notice that some of my other ancestors, Irish immigrants who came here after slavery—that they'd benefited too. The whole reason this was the Land of Opportunity was that the booming economy was built on unpaid labor. If the jobs for immigrants had been in Siberia, many of us would be Siberians right now. All of which is to say that white Americans of all backgrounds have benefited from and thus have good cause to feel responsible for addressing the legacy of slavery.

So the invitation is for parishes to uncover the details of their relationship to slavery and racism, and then to sit with the pregnant question: What now?... What now? Sit with that question for a moment here. Chances are we each have one kind of resistance or another to facing that question.

My sense is that for those of us who are white (affectionately: people of palor), we often don't show up for this conversation, this work, because we think of ourselves as “not racist” and thus off the hook. And by that we usually mean “not personally racist.” Your former Assistant Minister, Monique Ellison, reframed things beautifully in an interview that's in the short film, *Repairing the Breach*, that I showed this morning. She said: “My fear about a dialogue about the history of slavery, is that we'll get into dealing with guilt rather than dealing with the system... that is born out of the fact of slavery and racism. And white people tend to get offended when we talk about racism and say ‘I'm not a racist’...and a lot of them don't get that ...I'm not saying that ‘you are personally prejudiced and you actively work to oppress me and my people.’ And I want to figure out a way... to help them understand what it is I am saying about a *system* of racism in this country.” We can honor her by hearing what she's trying to say and bringing our attention to structural inequities in housing, healthcare, jobs, education, criminal justice.

Another common form of resistance is just feeling hopeless or overwhelmed: “The problems are so big, so long in the making, so complex, and I’m so busy.”

This is when faith is key; entering a process and trusting God’s grace. And when a commitment to love of neighbor is key; entering relationships and trusting God’s grace.

Let me share a concrete suggestion here (I’ve heard that in the evangelical movement in the 19th century people would be asked to do altar calls and sign up for the abolition movement at the same time!). I can’t help but imagine what good work would come out of St. Peter’s and St. Thomas Church and Christ Church, Mother Bethel, and St. George’s joining together for a magical mystery process. You are such thriving congregations with so much to offer. Imagine in-depth dialogue. Forming small groups in which people take the time to tell stories, to share in a way that I gather some of you have done before with Ledlie: sharing spiritual autobiographies of how race has woven in and out of your lives. Imagine a commitment to breaking through the awkward, unspoken places. Imagine a commitment to charting such new waters with each other that bringing leadership to the city becomes the obvious next step.

Imagine Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and the other pioneers from this history-laden neighborhood as a cloud of witnesses, watching over such a process.

Mother Bethel is actually celebrating the 250th of Richard Allen’s birth this year, with festivities beginning this weekend. My parents and I attended a service Friday night, to which people had come from all over the country, unhindered by the snow! May we send our respects in their direction at 6th and Lombard as they gather in celebration at this very moment. St. George’s is worshiping with them today. And of course honor and greetings to our sisters and brothers at St. Thomas who share in this Feast Day of their founding father, Absalom Jones.

May you all build on your painful histories and more recent hopeful relationships and join each other for the work of repair in the months and years ahead.

I’d like to end with a love story. It’s Valentine’s Day after all. There’s an author and columnist for the Miami Herald, Leonard Pitts. Some of you may know his work. He’s black and often writes about black history and issues, which triggers many white readers to contact him to say: “What do you want from me?” Pitts was tired of hearing that. But when he was asked that question by a 17-year old girl, he realized that if someone her age wanted to know, he should take it seriously and answer her in his column.

I’d like to share part of his answer. He wrote: “Don’t hate black history, if only because it’s your history, too. It exists not to accuse you or shame you. It simply exists, and you, every bit as much as I, have to make peace with it. Understand that this is sacred ground and it hurts to walk here... But... I ‘need’ to walk here: need the strength, the sense of purpose, the knowledge of self, that walking here imparts... So please, don’t tell me how to walk this ground. Don’t tell me when you think I’ve walked it long enough. And don’t think every silence needs a voice to fill it. Sometimes silence is an opportune place to ponder and to pray. What do I want from you? I want you to be my sister and to walk here with me. I know it’s a hard walk. I know it causes you pain. But this much I also know: If ever we learn to tread this ground together, there’s no place we can’t go.”