

The Lenten Practice of Repair

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Today our diocese remembers its local saint, Blessed Absalom Jones, who was born a slave in Delaware and ultimately became the first African American to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church here in Philadelphia. His feast day, the anniversary of his death, was Tuesday. But we are dedicating our service today to his memory and to the work that his memory calls us to do.

It is good work for the first Sunday of Lent, especially when Lent helps us to launch changes that continue well after Easter.

What do we tend to remember about Blessed Absalom Jones, the first African American priest ordained in the Episcopal Church? He was enslaved from his birth in 1746 until he was nearly 40 years old, when he was granted manumission by Benjamin Wynkoop, the man who enslaved him. Jones had previously purchased the freedom of his wife Mary, so that his children could also be free. He became a lay preacher at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and along with his friend Richard Allen was so successful at adding Black members to the congregation¹ that the White members tried to segregate them in the balcony. In response Jones and Allen led a walkout from the church. Eventually each would found a church for Black congregations: Jones, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and Allen, Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Both still exist today.

Absalom Jones would lead the African Episcopal Church of St Thomas for 24 years as a layman, then a deacon, then a priest. Along with Allen, he led Black Philadelphians to minister to the sick in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793. He established institutions that addressed the needs of people freed from slavery. He developed schools and supportive services for the Black community, as well. Throughout that time he actively advocated for an end to slavery. It would not happen in his lifetime. He died in 1818.

Absalom Jones' life teaches us an essential Lenten practice, and that is repair.

During Lent we spend a lot of time talking about repentance, turning away from practices that separate us from the love of God. Racism in all its manifestations, from its worst bigotries to its systemic nature, is certainly a sin to repent of. In fact, I consider it a core sin – one so rooted in the founding of our country and the shaping of American culture that it continues to lie at the very center of our institutions, our economy, our health, education and criminal systems, our day- to-day lives. It is measured in race-based inequities in all of these areas. It is measured in the resistance to changing a system that won't raise taxes to pay for public goods, that won't improve education in impoverished areas, that won't make health care available to all, that disproportionately fills its jails with Black and Brown people, that won't stem the flow of guns into vulnerable communities or invest in measure to keep people safe and whole. It rears its head in those who have benefitted from it when they are convinced that there is nothing that can be done, or that the solution lies only in other people.

Racism is a sin of the core. When the core is weak the whole body suffers. I learned this by doing Pilates. Strengthen the core and everything attached to it benefits. The same is true of a core sin like racism. We

¹ <http://www.aecst.org/ajones.htm>

need to do more than to repent and turn away from it, we need to repair the body that has been weakened and damaged by its practice of racism.

Absalom Jones is a saint who teaches us about repair.

Even when the wound of slavery was decades away from beginning to close, he was working to repair its damage. In the face of a system that would continue to oppress Black and Brown people to this day, Absalom Jones helped create systems to resist that sin – organizations and schools and social institutions.

He worked to strengthen the core of his church and community. This is at the heart of repairing the damage we have done as church and community. Strengthen the core and you strengthen all the muscles attached – all the justice muscles, all the muscles of faith and goodwill. It's all connected.

It's important to note that Absalom's example of repair was not miraculous. It did not end slavery or oppression or bigotry all on its own. It did not prevent Jim Crow. His work of repair was much like the gospel's work of repair, Christ's work of repair. I daresay it was grounded in the gospel, and in being a disciple of Christ. Christ's work of repair was a steady walk to the cross that left healing and hope and a vision of the Kingdom of God in its wake. Christ's work of repair was to lead humanity to a deep humility that relied entirely on God's grace and forgiveness to lift it up into Easter life. Christ's work of repair is a steady invitation to lay down our own power in order to be empowered by Easter life.

When dominators try to fix things without first laying down their will to dominate and to control, things usually stay broken, or are made worse. Perhaps that is why Black and Brown people are still plagued by racism after hundreds of years of White dominance. Despite some of our best efforts to address racism, and our deepest regrets about racism, and all that we know about the history of racism, our White-dominated culture has failed to grasp an essential part of anti-racism work. It requires humility and not dominance. Those of us who have inherited the legacy of that dominance have our own weaknesses and wounds that need repair in the grace of Easter. And while that's humbling, it doesn't have to be humiliating or shaming.

Humility is the key posture of Gospel repair, and of Absalom Jones' dedication to the work. He had no power. He carried the wounds of racism in his own body, which was born in slavery. He could free a few, but not all. What powered his life came from faith, and from grace, and from the strength of a believing community.

As the co-chair of the diocese's Anti-Racism Commission, I've sat in on many conversations about racial repair and healing. I've spoken with some who want to jump to reparations without doing any of the work of laying down the power that ultimately snatches all the resources back. And I've spoken with others who are convinced that the price tag of reparations to Black and Brown people for what they have suffered is too high for our country to pay. In a country where multi-billion-dollar corporations are too big to fail, reparations on the other hand are too big to pay.

Absalom Jones teaches us that the Lenten work of repair is humble, steady and visionary. It does not despair of bringing on the world it desires, even as it works with what is at hand. It does all it can, and lets God do the rest.

A good example of this today is the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, which began paying reparations to Black and Brown people in 2020.

Before that, the diocese had spent 15 years studying its racial history and how it benefited from the labor of enslaved people, as well as from systems that oppressed or marginalized Black people after slavery was abolished. That was the truth-telling part and the humbling part. That's the part that helps an Episcopal institution lay down its tendency toward dominance.

Then in 2020 it dedicated \$1 million to the effort of making amends, and it annually disburses sizeable grants to organizations with a track record of restoring African American and Black communities.

Speaking at the 80th General Convention of The Episcopal Church in 2022, Maryland Bishop Eugene Taylor Sutton, who is African American, said this:

"You know, all too often we want to do reconciliation on the cheap. We don't want to pay the price of being reconciled; we want it for free; we want it to be easy and all smiles. But if reconciliation doesn't cost anything, then it's not worth anything! There is no reconciliation without a reckoning, and the time is now. If you don't think the time is now, tell me when; give me a date—when is the time for justice? We believe it's now. The payment of reparations is a reckoning for the racial sins of our nation and our church against persons with beautiful Black skin like mine."

"If reconciliation doesn't cost anything, then it's not worth anything!" the man said. This is Lenten repair. And it also puts a new spin on giving things up for Lent. Racial repentance and reconciliation have a cost. The cost is to let go of the need to dominate others, and give to that power over to God. Freedom is what comes after that.

Today in honor of Absalom Jones we have an opportunity to invest in racial repair directly by contributing to the Absalom Jones Fund for Episcopal Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The fund supports two institutions affiliated with The Episcopal Church since the 1800's. You should have received envelopes when you arrived, in which you can put a cash contribution or a check to go in today's collection. Or you can scan the QR code on the envelope to make a donation online. We will send the money that's collected to the fund, which is managed by the national church office.

In the first reading, Isaiah reminds us that God's people were made for work such as this, not to dominate, but to assist God in repairing what is broken in us and in our world. So, I leave you with God's words in Isaiah:

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness...

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

And that's good news. Amen.