

Today all the churches in the diocese have been asked to celebrate our local saint, Blessed Absalom Jones. How many of you know who I'm talking about? Absalom Jones. We'll learn more in a moment about the first black man to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church.

If we were to ask Absalom what he would want us to remember about him, I think he would say: if you're going to remember me, don't dis-member me. Which is a way of saying, while you might not know every detail of my story, don't leave out the dangerous parts. And while the former things have come to pass, and new things are being declared, Absalom would say don't forget who freed you.

And I think Absalom would say to us – remember what freedom really means. Re-member what friendship with Jesus really requires. So what should we remember about Blessed Absalom Jones today?

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, so that his children could also be free. He became a lay preacher at St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and along with his friend Richard Allen was so successful at adding black members to the congregation that the white members tried to segregate them in the balcony. In response Jones and Allen led a walkout of the black members from the church. Eventually each would found a church for black congregation: Jones, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and Allen, Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Both of which 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. Throughout that time, he would actively advocate for an end to slavery. It would not happen in his lifetime. He died in 1818.

But what of the dangerous memory? What can be forgotten in the celebration of firsts and foundings and church fathers? The trauma of enslaved people can be forgotten. Our country's economic underpinnings, which relied on enslaving people can be forgotten. The inheritance of that wealth and its privileges for white people right into the present can be forgotten.

Consider the dangerous memories that the Rev. Absalom Jones wove into his own preaching to his congregation of freed people, memories that were still fresh in their experience.

On Jan. 1, 1808 Jones preached a sermon at St. Thomas expressing his joy and gratitude in the decision by Congress to abolish the formal Atlantic slave trade. This of course did not end the enslavement of people within the United States, which would not happen for nearly 60 more years. But Absalom Jones called it the "first fruits of peace upon earth, and good will to man." More than an act of Congress, it was an act of God.

It was the act of a God who heard the cry of enslaved Africans, much as God heard the cry of Israel, Jones said. It was the act of a God who saw them.

"He has seen the wicked arts, by which wars have been fomented among the different tribes of the Africans, in order to procure captives, for the purpose of selling them for slaves," Jones preached. "...He has seen the anguish which has taken place, when parents have been torn from their children, and children from their parents, and conveyed, with their hands and feet bound in fetters, on board of ships prepared to receive them. ... He has seen all the different modes of torture, by means of the whip, the

screw, the pincers, and the red hot iron, which have been exercised upon their bodies, by inhuman overseers...

Absalom's words ring like a psalm of lament. And they resonate like a beatitude, as he rejoices in one change in the slave trade – even as the institution lingered on.

“The great and blessed event, which we have this day met to celebrate, is a striking proof, that the God of heaven and earth is the same, yesterday, and to-day, and forever,” Jones tells his congregation.

It was not slave owner Benjamin Wynkoop who freed Absalom Jones. It was God. Because the God who sees, for Absalom Jones, is the God who frees; the God who remembers. Everything.

One of the great acts of our liturgy is the act of remembering, which the Eucharist as our most dangerous example – because in Eucharist we insist that it makes happen what it remembers. We remember that it was more than a Passover meal, a blessing of bread and wine, a sharing, an act of hospitality. We remember that that meal happened on the night before Jesus's death, the night he was betrayed, the night he was handed over to soldiers and to the mob. We remember that it was the night before his state-sanctioned killing, the night before he was lynched – an age-old act of terrorism practiced by people afraid of losing power. And we remember what God did to that event, transforming it into a sign not of defeat but of life. That's a dangerous story, because in that story we remember what freedom is, and what it means for God to call us friends.

Freedom is a dangerous offer, because it requires death to an old life before living into a new one. Friendship with God is a dangerous friendship, because it means living lives of beatitude, gratitude for that which has not fully happened, rejoicing in things we still hope for.

Absalom Jones knew that the offer of freedom that we relive every time we remember the night before Jesus died, was not just an offer for himself and for his congregation at the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. But it was also an offer of freedom for the slave holder Benjamin Wynkoop who attended Christ Church and St. Peter's in Philadelphia and served as its vestryman, warden and benefactor. It was an offer of freedom for Bishop William White, who both ordained the church's first African American priest in Absalom Jones and who also became the vice president of the American Colonization Society, which sought to send freed black people back to Africa rather than have them live among white people.

It's an offer of freedom for the oppressed and the oppressor, because both are held bound, both are dismembered by what we choose to forget or refuse to acknowledge. But God remembers who we were made to be, and how we might fully become that in what we receive at this table.

God's offer of freedom is both freedom from and freedom to. It is freedom from bondage, in this case the bond of prejudice and fear, as this morning's opening collect reminds us. It is freedom to live the reconciling love of the children of God. To become friends of Jesus.

In today's Gospel Jesus calls his followers friends, their friendship measured by how well they obey the command to love. To be Jesus's friends requires us to see our own place in the racial breach that continues to plague God's people. It asks us to lay down our lives so that God may transform them. It invites us to become instruments of repair. Should we so choose. It's a choice we are offered every week in the dangerous memory of a body broken and blood spilled. It's a choice that requires all the help we can get.

And so Blessed Absalom, pray for us.

Amen.