

Year A Last Sunday After Epiphany/Feast of Absalom Jones

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Re-Membering Absalom Jones

Christians are a storytelling people. We tell stories of our long life with God, stories of our ancestors, stories of our heroes and saints. We are also a dramatic people. We act out those stories in pageants and passion plays and rituals. And we try to live in ways that rhyme with those stories as well.

This Eucharist is a great dramatic storytelling from start to finish, as we proclaim the Scriptures and we enact a supper that sounds like Jesus' last supper, but is really our post-resurrection banquet.

We do these things because stories are powerful and transformative, and true stories are more powerful still. Which is why true stories often get buried or distorted or removed altogether from public discourse. As people of faith, our storytelling has always had an act of defiance to it, especially when it lifts people who were oppressed or martyred for their faith by the state – sometimes even the church itself.

I'm thinking about the power of our stories on the day we celebrate our local saint and hero, Blessed Absalom Jones. His was not a story that I heard, growing up a Catholic in Ohio. However, when I moved to Philadelphia, I was immersed in it. It is an Episcopalian story and a Philadelphia story and a national story of a man whose faith freed him to work to abolish slavery, though he did not live to see it actualized.

The power of sacred and transforming stories comes to mind for me in these weeks since the National Park Service removed the historical plaques that told of the nine enslaved people who worked at President George Washington's Philadelphia residence when he lived there from 1790-1797.¹ That story itself was a pretty recent addition to the narratives told on the history walks through Old City. An organization called the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition had worked for years to include it in the cannon around George Washington. The exhibit opened in 2010; you had to walk through it to get to the liberty bell.

The plaques were removed last month as part of the Trump administration's effort to purge national monuments and museums of any narratives that the president feels inappropriately disparage past or living Americans.

¹National Park Service dismantles slavery exhibit in Philadelphia, January 25, 2026:15 AM ET
Heard on Weekend Edition Sunday <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/25/nx-s1-5686524/national-park-service-dismantles-slavery-exhibit-in-philadelphia>

It's one of many such acts aimed to weaken our hold on gospel values – values like welcoming the stranger, freeing the oppressed, protecting the vulnerable, standing with the poor, repenting of pride and sinfulness and living the way of love. In the face of the administration's efforts, telling a true story at church on Sunday becomes a subversive act. And living a life that rhymes with that story is a defiant one.

But we are a storytelling people and we have a story to tell. Absalom Jones is part of that story.

If we were to ask Blessed Absalom what he would want us to remember about him, especially in the light of how the Park Service treats our national narrative, 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 his enslaver Benjamin Wynkoop. 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 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 congregations: Jones, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and Allen, Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Both still exist today. ²

The African Episcopal Church of St Thomas was established in 1794 on the corner of what is now 5th and St James Street in Old City. It was just two blocks south of George Washington's home, where Austin, Paris, Hercules, Christopher Sheels, Richmond, Giles, Oney Judge, Moll and Joe were enslaved. They and Absalom Jones were contemporaries.

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.

² Absalom Jones Wikipedia entry https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absalom_Jones

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.

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.

When Jones became a preacher and then an Episcopal priest, he signed on to proclaim the dangerous story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, 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 African 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 dis-membered by what we choose to forget or refuse to acknowledge when we remove the dangerous uncomfortable parts of the story from our historical markers.

God, however, never forgets who we were made to be, and how we might fully become what we are made to be in what we receive at this table.

Absalom Jones would not only warn us not to dis-member the past, but also would challenge us not to dis-member the present. He would have some things to say about the act of removing historical plaques about enslaved people from the site that leads to the liberty bell. He would have some suggestions about how we might stand with and protect people hunted down and detained by federal agents. He would have some thoughts on the power of churches to resist injustice. The conditions that we lament today would not be unfamiliar to Jones as a black man who died 47 years before slavery was abolished.

To rhyme our lives of faith with Absalom's life of faith, we might consider the ways we are called to preach good news, proclaim the truth, walk out of sinful structures, and build new and hopeful ones in our city at this time.

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 has wounded our nation from its founding. It asks us to lay down our lives so that God may transform them. It invites us to become instruments of repair. It's a choice we are offered every week in the dangerous memory of a body broken and blood spilled, as well as in the horrifying present of our news cycle.

It's a choice that requires all the help we can get.

And so Blessed Absalom, pray for us.