

On Absalom and Freedom

February 17, 2019: The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Christ Church Detroit

[Luke 6:17-26](#)

Yesterday I was at the Cathedral along with several of you for the Feast of Blessed Absalom Jones, who was the first black person to be ordained as an Episcopal priest. Absalom Jones had been born into slavery; he was separated from his family at a very young age, when his master sold his mother and all of his siblings, and took only Absalom along with him to a new city--to Philadelphia--where Absalom worked in the master's store as a slave.

The master did allow Absalom to go to a night school there in Philadelphia for enslaved people, and there Absalom learned to read; he learned math; he learned how to save what he could along the way. He married a woman named Mary and, saving his resources, was able to purchase her freedom. He soon saved enough to purchase his own freedom as well, although his master did not permit it. It would be years until his master finally allowed Absalom to purchase his own freedom. And when he did, Absalom continued to work in the master's store, receiving daily wages.

It was also during this time that Absalom came to attend St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Since Methodism had grown as a form of Anglicanism back in England, this was a time before the Methodist Church had come into its own denomination distinct from the Episcopal Church. So there Absalom was, attending St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where he met Richard Allen, and together they became among the first black lay preachers in the predominantly white congregation of St. George's. They began to teach, and they contributed what resources they could to the betterment of the congregation.

In one instance, Absalom and Richard and their friends and neighbors had collected their resources to help build an addition to the church. In this case, they were building a balcony into the church, so that it could house more people. On the day that the balcony opened, white leaders of the congregation forcibly shoved Absalom and Richard and the other black congregants into the balcony, thus physically segregating the congregation.

Absalom was one of the first to lead a walk-out from St. George's, and Richard and Absalom would form their own black church, which they called first the African Church of Philadelphia and came to be known as the African Church of St. Thomas. They served together until Richard felt drawn more toward Methodism, which was emerging as its own style of church, and Absalom felt drawn to continue in the Episcopal tradition. Richard would go on to found Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first AME church, and Absalom would become the first black deacon in the Episcopal Church and later Bishop William White would ordain him as the first black priest.

In her sermon about Absalom's story and how live, real, and prescient it is for us today, Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows--who herself opens a new chapter in history, as the first black female diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church, consecrated two years ago--highlighted one aspect of Absalom's story that, she said, she somehow had glided over all of these years. She noted that, at first hearing, the fact that Absalom freed his wife first is a story of self-sacrifice, of putting another's needs before one's own. She said that the part that she had glided past is how strategic, then, Absalom's form of self-sacrifice was, because whoever would be born to an enslaved woman would be enslaved themselves. So even before Absalom and Mary had any children of their own, he purchased her freedom, so that any of their future children would be free, and their children would be free, and their children would be free.

Jennifer also mentioned yesterday that that was the third of three Absalom Jones feasts that she had been at in seven days--the first in New York City, the second in Indianapolis in her home cathedral, and the third in Detroit with us. She mentioned to me afterwards that she had received comments to the effect of, "Good thing you're preaching at the same service all across the country, because then you can just say the same thing in different places." She related to me, "No, I wrote different sermons for each place and each people, because the Word is speaking fresh and in a unique way to each one of us, in each of our unique places."

I didn't find it a coincidence, then, that her remarks yesterday were largely around the phenomenon of freedom--or, I wonder, false freedom--that comes at the expense of others. I heard her reflections about such "freedom" in a new way here in Detroit now, where we are so well-acquainted as a city, as a metropolitan area, with wealth and industry that has been built, in part, on the backs of those who have come here with few options, few protections in society, not to mention little power to be freely and fully themselves.

I heard these remarks in a different way, thinking specifically about how the 375 highway brought convenience, of a sort, at the expense of entire neighborhoods, the entire Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods--lively, successful, robust historically black neighborhoods inclusive of Jewish neighbors and immigrants from all over the world, full of businesses, creative arts, homes, and communities. I found myself reflecting in particular yesterday about a sense of false freedom, like false prophets before us, about whom Jesus talks today. False freedom can feel like convenience, fullness, comfort, and privilege, and exists at the expense and sometimes to the demise and destruction of human beings, of God's beloved children. As Jennifer said yesterday, true freedom itself is not free.

True freedom is perhaps the most costly and risky of any enterprise--and also, the most necessary.

It sounds so much to me like what Jesus is talking about in the now-famous Beatitudes. Today we hear Luke's version, which is distinct from Matthew's telling of such statements. In Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount", Jesus is talking from a mountaintop down to the people, who are far below; speaking, then, from some otherworldly and distant location to people down below. But in Luke, Jesus is speaking not only with his disciples but with anyone who is coming from great distances, just curious to hear what he's about to say, hungry for a sense of the power and healing that emanates from him and his words. He talks on the same level with them, and as he speaks, we hear from Luke that he looks up at them--not down at them from on high--but looks up at them. "Blessed are you who are poor now, for yours is the kingdom of God."

I've been thinking and reading a lot about spirituals lately, in part because we are hearing so many in our Sunday worship, through Ed's and the choir's leadership. Spirituals: these songs that sing the kingdom of God in which there is freedom. Spirituals, which sing this kingdom of God even when we can't see it or feel it yet. Spirituals, which are borne out of sorrow and slavery, and through language and movement and melody yearn for and assert a freedom known in the heart but not seen in reality. Spirituals, which assert that when we are hungry, we can in a sense be glad because that is not the end of the story. More poignantly, when we grieve, we can in a sense be glad, because Jesus has destroyed death, so somehow, somewhere, death is not all there is. We can punctuate, we can let our grief be shot through with praise, somehow, because our grief, poverty, and sorrow are not all that there is.

We can sing "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" and punctuate, not let our breath end, unless we also exclaim--or whisper--"Glory, Hallelujah". James Cone, a black theologian who died recently and devoted his career to writing and

teaching, especially at Union Seminary in New York, highlights that this “Glory, Hallelujah” was “not a denial of trouble; it was an affirmation of faith. God is the companion of sufferers, and trouble [or death] are not the last word on human existence.”¹

Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich now, for you have received all you’re gonna get. Woe to you who are full now, because you will hunger for what is real and true. Woe to you who laugh and mock and assume that you are powerful now, for you will mourn the very presence of God, who is always on the side of the oppressed, always making a way where there is no way, always bringing freedom.”

To take a page from my husband’s book, who spoke of the children’s book *Runaway Bunny* last week, there is one called *The Beatitudes: From Slavery to Civil Rights*, which is written and illustrated for children, yet--like so many children’s books--does not speak only to the young in years. It is written by Carole Boston Weatherford and has, in effect, two voices. One is saying the Beatitudes as a bass line or ostinato throughout: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who mourn, for you shall be comforted...” At the same time, a poet speaks:

“I am the Lord your God. I was with the Africans who were torn from the Motherland and cramped in holds of ships on the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas. I heard them chant: *Kum ba ya, kum ba ya...*

I was with Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and James Varick, who founded churches where African Americans could praise the Lord and shout “Hallelujah!” I rang the church bells...

I was with Harriet Tubman when she fled slavery. As she led others out of bondage, I was the star guiding them north...

I was with Marian Anderson when she sang spirituals on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution barred her from performing in their concert hall. I was the microphone...

I was with six-year-old Ruby Bridges when angry whites heckled her as she entered an all-white elementary school to become its first black student. I held her hand...

--and blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God--

I was with Fannie Lou Hamer when she got sick and tired of being sick and tired and demanded the right to vote. When she breathed song into the struggle, I shook the tambourine.

--and blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy--

I was with Barack Obama when he took his oath as President of the United States. I was the Bible where he placed his hand.

--Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad--

I was with your ancestors and I will be with your offspring, standing on the side of justice. Even now, I am with the downtrodden and with those who seek uplift. I am holy water in the stream of humanity. Drink, bathe, be free.”²

Thanks be to God.

¹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), p. 58

² Carole Boston Weatherford, *The Beatitudes: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (2009)