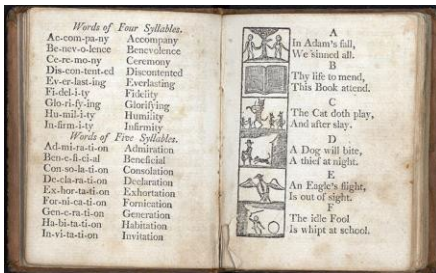


INTRODUCTION

This is the story of Blessed Absalom Jones, priest, abolitionist, and saint, who is listed in the Episcopal calendar of saints, February 13. Absalom Jones was born on November 6, 1746 and, in 1802, became the first African American to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church of the United States. When we learn the Rev. Absalom Jones' history, we do not just learn about one extraordinary man. We, also, learn about the Episcopal church, then and now.



A common primer in use during Absalom's life.

ENSLAVEMENT

Absalom Jones was born enslaved on Cedar Creek Hundred plantation, part of the present day Sussex County section of the City of Milford, in the state of Delaware on November 6, 1746. The State of Delaware commemorates Absalom Jones' birthplace with a state historical marker.

What does it mean to be born enslaved? It means you are the property of another person. You have to do what this person says – work when they say, eat when they say, sleep when they say. You are not free.

Absalom's family was enslaved, too. They were all enslaved by a wealthy Anglican planter named Abraham Wynkoop whose father had also been an enslaver. They were part of his property that would be handed down in his will to his sons and daughters.

When Absalom was still a little boy, Abraham Wynkoop took him from the fields to work inside the Wynkoop house. This gave Absalom the chance to earn a little money as tips. He saved this money and finally had enough to buy three books - a primer, a spelling book, and a Bible. (A primer was a book that taught reading and writing.) Learning to read and write had a big impact on Absalom's future. It also allowed him to write his mother letters. He said that his love of books and reading kept him out of trouble.

Discussion

The enslavement of African Americans is a deeply shameful* and sinful part of our history for white and black Americans. How do you think the history of African enslavement is still affecting America today? How is it affecting your neighborhood in Philadelphia or wherever you live? What things do you think need to change? * Is this sense of “shame” the same for White and Black Americans?

Many white Americans at the time did not think slavery was wrong, most of whom were Christians. How could this have been true? Whose suffering are we unable to see today in America? Do you think the attitudes of white Americans have changed since this time? If not, how could we as a church help change them?



NEW FREEDOM AND COMMUNITY

After Abraham's death his son Benjamin Wynkoop inherited the plantation. A few years later, in 1761, when Absalom was a teenager, Benjamin sold Absalom's mother and siblings, sold the plantation, and moved to Philadelphia, taking Absalom with him. Benjamin, whose maternal grandfather was also a merchant in the city, opened a store. Absalom, who had taught himself to read and write, was put to work as the store's clerk. Benjamin allowed Absalom to attend a Quaker-sponsored night school where Absalom learned mathematics. Benjamin Wynkoop helped found St. Peter's Church at Third and Pine Streets. Absalom attended St. Peter's with the Wynkoops. Christ Church, 2nd & Market and St. Peter's were treated as one congregation. Benjamin served several terms on the vestry and was later involved in the formation of Episcopal Academy. Absalom was subject to Pennsylvania's restrictive special laws that only applied to African Americans.

When Absalom Jones was 24 years old, in 1770, he married Mary Thomas at Christ Church on Second Street in Philadelphia. Mary was enslaved to Sarah King who also attended St. Peter's. Benjamin and Sarah had to give permission for Absalom and Mary to marry. Absalom and his father-in-law John Thomas, borrowed money and used their savings, to buy Mary's freedom. If Mary was not free when they had children, the children would have been the property of the Wynkoop family. Absalom and Mary worked hard and saved money. They repaid the loaned money and bought property. Although Pennsylvania passed the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780 it did not immediately free any slaves. Absalom continuously asked Benjamin to allow him to buy his freedom, as Benjamin could take their property, but Benjamin refused. Finally, in 1784, when Absalom was 38 years old, Benjamin freed Absalom by granting him a manumission. Absalom continued to work as a clerk in the Wynkoop's store but was now paid a salary.

Soon after becoming free, Absalom Jones became friends with a man named Richard Allen. They both saw a need in Philadelphia to take care of newly freed African Americans. Those who became sick, or widowed, or orphaned, often had nowhere to turn. Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and other African

American men, formed a self-help organization - the Free African Society in 1787 the same year the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia. It was one of the earliest Black-led organizations to help free African Americans.

While Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and Harry Hoosier, helped many African American Philadelphians who were in need, as Methodist class leaders, they also began to preach to the African American community at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Fourth and Race Streets, Philadelphia. Word soon spread and the congregation grew. Absalom, Richard, Harry, and other Black worshippers helped raise money to build a balcony to accommodate the growing congregation. The Free African Society also began to hold separate worship services in people's homes and in rented rooms. The Rev. Joseph Pilmore, a priest at St. Paul's Church, Third Street between Walnut Street and Locust Street (now the home of Episcopal Community Services), served as their minister.

In the early 1790s, when Absalom Jones was in his early 40s, St. George's decided its African American members had to worship, separately, in the newly built church balcony. On one Sunday morning during the church service ushers tried to force Absalom and others from their seats. In response, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen led most of the African American members out of the church in an historic, peaceful, walk-out.

Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and other members of the Free African Society, decided to form the African Church of Philadelphia. The influential physician, abolitionist, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush, helped them write a plan and raise money.

Discussion

Absalom Jones gained his freedom in his late 30s and his life became his own. He began an organization to help others and began to preach. What do you think about his choices? What would you have done if you were him? How do you think his faith influenced his choices?

When Absalom Jones was enslaved and still a child, he was isolated on the plantation and had no family. When he became free, he became part of a wider community – first his own new family, then the Free African Society, then a new church. Community made him stronger – it empowered him – to change himself and his city. How do you feel you are part of a community? What is it about community that empowers us? Does your community give you what you need? Does this section or the earlier section provide an opportunity to discuss racial disparities in educational attainments?



Recreation of Yellow Fever epidemic

RADICAL LOVE

While the Free African Society was raising money to build the African Church, a terrible outbreak of

yellow fever struck Philadelphia in the summer of 1793. Thousands of people were sick and dying. No one knew that yellow fever was caused by infected mosquitoes and standing water prevalent throughout the city was a perfect mosquito breeding ground. Philadelphia's Mayor Matthew Clarkson and Dr. Benjamin Rush appealed to the Free African Society for help. Dr. Rush, relying on incorrect information attributed to a physician in Charleston, South Carolina, initially believed that African Americans were immune to yellow fever. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen surveyed the city, saw the devastation, and after praying for guidance, offered their assistance. They organized many in the African American community to tend to the sick and bury the dead. They worked tirelessly. African Americans sickened and died too. Richard Allen and Joseph Pilmore both got sick but they both recovered. Matthew Carey published a book that praised Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, but that said bad things about many of the African American nurses. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen published their own book – the first book published by African Americans in the United States – that defended the African American nurses.

Discussion

African American Philadelphians risked their lives to take care of their white neighbors at a time when most white Philadelphians were deeply prejudiced against them. Here we can see what it is like to live out Jesus' commandment to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. What do you think happens when we try to love our enemies? Why does Jesus think it is so important for us to do it? Do racial disparities in healthcare plague us today?



The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas today

ORDINATION AND THE CHURCH

The church's congregation decided to join the Episcopal Church. Richard wanted to be a Methodist and left the African Church to form Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church that would become the "Mother Church" of the African Methodist Episcopal Church denomination. Harry Hoosier and others would later found African Zoar Methodist Episcopal Church that would remain in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The African Church's members asked Absalom Jones to be their leader. Absalom prayed [like Jacob at the Jabbok, Genesis 32:22-32] and felt that God wanted him to be their leader and would bless their work. Serving first as a Reader, Absalom Jones worked with Bishop William White and the African Church was admitted to the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania as the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Absalom Jones was ordained a deacon in The Episcopal Church in 1795.

In 1802, when the Rev. Absalom Jones was 56 years old, he became the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church. He was ordained by Bishop William White, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania. The Diocese of Pennsylvania negotiated a compromise with Bishop White to ordain the

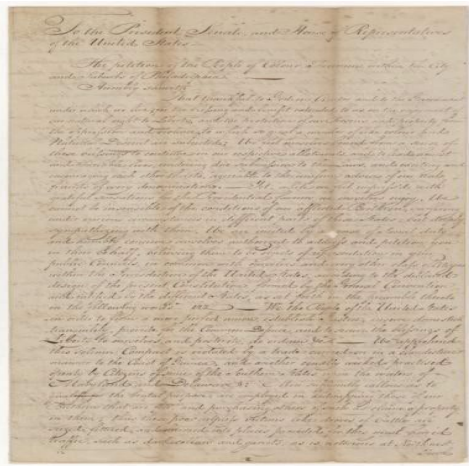
Rev. Jones: neither the Rev. Jones nor anyone from St. Thomas was allowed to attend the annual diocesan convention.

[As a point of history, a man born in Cape Coast in the present day African country of Ghana, Philip Quaque (1741-1816), who was ordained in London in 1765, was the first African priest in the Church of England and in the Anglican Communion. His ministry was spent laboring in Cape Coast as a missionary.]

By 1834 St. Thomas had a rector, the Rev. William Douglass, educated in Greek and Latin yet the prohibition on participation in diocesan convention continued. In 1854 a vote was held at diocesan convention on a motion to admit St. Thomas. A majority of the clergy approved but the majority of the laity rejected the motion. In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, St. Thomas was finally admitted to convention in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. In 1878, 76 years after the Rev. Absalom Jones was ordained, the first seminary was started to train black men for the priesthood. It was a segregated institution named the Bishop Payne Divinity School. In 1884, the first African Americans served as delegates to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church with voting rights. In 1918, 116 years after the Rev. Absalom Jones was ordained, the first black priests were consecrated “suffragan bishops for colored work” in the Episcopal church.

Discussion

The history of the Episcopal Church, like wider U.S. history, is one filled with racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of gender oppression. What is the Episcopal Church like in Philadelphia today? Have we made progress since the time of the Rev. Absalom Jones? What changes do you think Jesus would most like to see in our church?



Absalom Jones' petition to Congress

THE FINAL YEARS

Over the years, the Rev. Absalom Jones continued to preach at St. Thomas. He was loved by the congregation for being such a caring pastor. He was very well respected and spoke out in opposition to slavery. Before he was ordained, he worked with Quakers, Christ Church abolitionist Congressman John Swanwick, and others, and the petitioned the US Congress in 1797 and 1799 to end slavery.

Absalom Jones helped organize the first Prince Hall Masons African Lodge in Philadelphia becoming the first Prince Hall Masons Most Worshipful Master in Philadelphia and later the first Grand Master

in Pennsylvania.

The Rev. Absalom Jones started a day school for African American children at St. Thomas in 1804.

The U.S. Congress passed a law in 1808 that tried to stop the transatlantic slave trade. In thanksgiving and celebration, the Rev. Jones preached an important sermon known as “The Thanksgiving Sermon.” He told the people that God was against slavery.

In the War of 1812 the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen with their friend James Forten, a Revolutionary War veteran, sailmaker and member of St. Thomas, led the African American community in helping defend the City of Philadelphia against an invasion by the British.

By the end of the second decade in the nineteenth century racial violence in Philadelphia had become so bad that Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and James Forten were considering leaving the United States and emigrating to Africa, the Caribbean, or Canada but at a mass meeting at Mother Bethel Church in 1817 the majority of 3,000 black Philadelphians voted to remain in Philadelphia and fight for freedom, justice and equality for all.

When he died on February 13, 1818 the Rev. Absalom Jones was known throughout Philadelphia for his devotion to and care of his congregation, his community, and his city. Bishop William White praised Absalom Jones as a pastor who demonstrated love and devotion.

We remember the Rev. Absalom Jones because he loved God so deeply. We remember him because he blazed new paths for freedom of body and spirit, and took action as an Episcopal priest against injustice, using extraordinary courage. We remember him because of his tireless devotion and care for others. We remember him because he led our Church forward into its true ministry to welcome all people and to serve justice and freedom.

Discussion

What did you learn from this story?

What part of this story was most meaningful to you?