

## Absalom Jones. February 12, 2017.

Today we are celebrating the feast of Absalom Jones, the first African American Episcopal priest. If you are wondering, “Absala Who?,” take heart, I’ll tell his story in a moment. But first, I think it’s worthwhile to remind ourselves of why we celebrate individual saints. As best as I can tell, we honor and mark the saints because these people particularly demonstrate to us something unique about what faithful living looks like. Their lives teach us even something about the living God, and the ways that we can love God.

On saints’ days, we tend to have two tools: the life of the saint and the scriptures assigned for their feast day. Today’s readings are mostly riffing on one aspect of Absalom’s life, that he was enslaved as soon as he was born. And so we get Paul imploring the Galatians to hold fast to the terrifying responsibility of their freedom, rather than succumbing to the sickly sweetness of servitude to the law. And then we have Jesus approving a whole set of friend requests at once, moving the disciples in mass from the category of servants to the category of friends.

These are good texts about which much could be said. And they go well with some parts of Absalom’s life. His mother was enslaved in Delaware when he was born in 1746 and he himself was immediately enslaved upon birth. Eventually he was sold to a store owner in Philadelphia, where he went to a night school run by the Quakers and learned to read using the New Testament. He got married and bought his wife’s freedom, then eventually his own. As a freedman, he attended a Methodist church in Philadelphia, especially doing lay ministry for the Black membership. But his evangelism among free and still enslaved Black Philadelphians was a little more effective than the white church leaders had anticipated, and the Black membership in the church grew exponentially.

To be brief, the white vestry of the church got rather alarmed and decided to segregate the Black membership into the upstairs gallery, but didn’t communicate this decision to anyone. And then one Sunday morning when the ushers were instructed to move the Black folks upstairs, the Black folks refused and walked out as a group. They never went back, but started their own church, applied to be admitted as an Episcopal congregation, and Absalom Jones was eventually ordained as a priest. He served the new St. Thomas African Episcopal Church for many years of fruitful and faithful ministry.

Those are the bare bones of the story we’re working with today. And when that story is put into conversation with our scriptural texts, I think what we have this week is a chance to think about friendship. I know, it’s been yet another difficult week and friendship sounds like something to talk about during a calm time. But as we’re really talking about friendship with God, I suggest that being a good friend in difficult times can in fact be revolutionary. Jesus’ distinction in John between servants and friends is based on the level of knowledge one has. A servant is given a list of tasks, with no real framework for why they’re doing what they’re doing. Work is on a need-to-know basis: turn this screw, then turn that screw, then sand this piece of wood. And so on—you’re checking discrete tasks off a list, without ever being told that what you’re building is a bench. There is some comfort in that—you don’t have to think strategically, your responsibility is pretty low, the tasks tend to be fairly doable. But when you’re a friend, in Jesus’ sense, you’re told up front “Hey, let’s build a bench.” In this analogy you probably still get some instructions, but with the knowledge of the goal comes

empowerment, responsibility, and freedom. You're no longer fine just making sure that you follow each step on the crazy IKEA drawings; you're invested in the success of your friend's project and need the bench to hold up—so the IKEA instructions aren't going to be much help, haha.

Jesus makes his followers friends, of himself and God, rather than servants. Jesus invites us to the same kind of relationship, friends of God, called to work together with God to extend that web of friendship further and further. We all know that friendship involves strange dilemmas, grey areas, periods of getting it wrong with each other while we sort out certain foundations of the relationship. A good friendship will take us places where we're uncomfortable, as we share the purposes of another person. And friendship with God will do very much the same thing. There isn't really a step by step instruction manual for it, though there are stories about God that we can trust, that help us to know God better, and so firm up the friendship. The story of Absalom Jones is one of those stories.

That Sunday in Philadelphia, when the white vestry tried to segregate the church, shows us both a failure of friendship and a success of friendship. The vestry of the church fundamentally misunderstood what friendship with God entailed. Because it turns out that God's network of friends includes folks who aren't like us. And so our capacity for hospitality, for welcoming, for overcoming the ways we've been trained to think, are always being pushed beyond their limits. God had befriended Absalom Jones and hundreds of Black Philadelphians, and the church leadership wasn't prepared for what would have seemed to them to be the radical inclusivity of God's friendship.

And Absalom Jones and the folks who followed him out of that church show us what successful friendship with God looks like. You see, I think that Absalom was already living from his friendship with God, and when we do that we are bound to make what etiquette would call mistakes. We are bound to be out of step with a world that is still focused on walls rather than doors, on protecting rather than sharing. When we live from our friendship with God, of course we see that the church shouldn't be segregated—but those kinds of convictions will consistently (but not inevitably) put us in situations where we're the oddballs.

One of the reasons friendship with God gives us the feeling that the time is out of joint is that it inspires us to do the impossible. A good friendship pushes us to grow, to learn more, to do things we wouldn't usually dream of. And Absalom's friendship with God called him to be ordained a priest, as a freedman, in 1804—something that was undoubtedly impossible until he and God did it.

Absalom and the Black Episcopal Philadelphians didn't take friendship with God to mean that they had to be trod on by the people who set themselves up as the keepers of etiquette at God's table. They left that parish rather than submit to being servants rather than friends. When the church proved incapable of living into friendship with God, they created new a new space where friendship could flourish.

These are difficult times for friendship, with God and with each other. We are so tempted these days by the anger, frustration, and fear that lead us increasingly into isolation. But God has called us friends, and calls us to build new friendships with ever stranger people. We may at times find that we are in places that deny friendship, and then we are called to create spaces where friendship with God and each other can flourish. We are called to follow these friendships even as far as martyrdom. And the work that fidelity to these relationships invites us to do can change us and the world.