

I wonder what the enslaved Absalom Jones thought when he read the Gospel reading from John the first time. ‘Love one another as I have loved you’. What do you think he thought about the man who owned him? Do you think he thought Benjamin Wynkoop loved him as Christ commanded him to do, especially after he sold his mother and his siblings? Fifteen years after he had purchased his freedom from Benjamin Wynkoop, the then Rev. Absalom Jones wrote in a petition to the US Congress in 1799: “... how increasingly is the evil [of slavery] aggravated when practiced in a Land, high in the profession of the benign doctrines of our blessed Lord, who taught his followers to do unto others as they would they should do unto them!” Indeed. I am sure that it was impossible for every enslaved laborer who could read the Gospels to understand how Christians could enslave other human beings to increase their personal wealth. What is more, and it’s the issue the Rev. Absalom Jones was addressing his petition to the government, how could a nation founded on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, also, be founded on the enslavement of other human beings? This was not the love Jesus was commanding in John’s gospel. Jesus is commanding a love in which one laid down his life for the next person. It was toward this love that the Rev. Jones was urging this Christian country.

It is necessary for us as Episcopalians to be aware of Rev. Jones’ passion for loving one another as Jesus commanded because he pushed us the Church and the country to look at ourselves in terms of what we professed to believe. The country was making far too much money on the sale and manufacture of raw cotton to want to listen.

We would not begin to hear what the Rev. Jones was saying until the abolition of slavery. Yet, even, then, we still did not learn how to love each other. We became convinced that those of us who were African American were intrinsically not good people because of our race, and we have perpetuated that myth into the current day. The myth is so believable that many African Americans have bought into it, too. We heard from the keynote speaker yesterday at the Diocesan THRIVE event that race is a social construct, something we made up and have perpetuated. We learned that there is nothing that supports the concept of race other than our wanting to believe it. Recent gene studies show that nothing about us that was created in the image of God supports our racial constructs, not our skin or eye color, hair texture, or the way we talk or walk ... nothing that we think creates race, does. Nothing creates race. In fact, gene studies have shown that I'm probably more related to Mother Barbara than I am to Mrs. Beth Hagan. Yet, we believe that because Mrs. Hagen and my skin are brown, or that because most of you share white skin, that you are more related to each other than you are to us. None of this is true. Race is the 'unclean spirit' that still lives among us. It is, as Deacon Carenda told us last week, the evil that we allow to exist in our world. We have, then, no reason to look at each other other on the basis of race.

I suggest that we take a closer look at the Gospel to figure out how we can look at each other on the basis of love. Rev. Jones is still petitioning us to pay attention to the scriptural command that we love each other as we would want to be loved. Regarding each other racially, tears us down. Looking at each other through the lens of love, builds

us up.

And, what does this look like, to look at all human beings through the lens of Jesus' love? Jesus said in today's Gospel that if we love one another as he loved us, that is to love each other so much that we would be ready to lay down our lives for each other, then he will no longer call us servants, but friends. When we can establish a sacrificial relationship with each other, then we will know everything that God wanted him to tell us about how to love one another. We must be ready to give up ourselves for each other to understand how God wants us to love. Jesus certainly understood this, didn't he? What part of the Rev. Absalom Jones' story makes you think he understood that he had to sacrifice his life to learn to love as God wanted him to love? I heard it in the part when he and his friend Richard Allen tended to those who were sick and dying from the Yellow Fever epidemic. While desperately wanting to build their new church, they had to put their plans on hold and sacrificed their lives to help the sick and dying poor who were left in the city. The reason we should listen to his petition to live into the love that Christ commanded is that he lived into it. Absalom Jones understood what we will understand when we begin to love each other as Jesus loved us. He and Richard Allen were tending to dying white people, not African Americans. Many of these people probably would not have associated with him when they were well because of the social construct of race that justified treating African Americans as inferior human beings. Yet, despite knowing this, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, sacrificed exposure to ill feelings to bring medicines to the sick and help bury their dead. This is the kind of love

Jesus commands of all of us who follow him.

So what do we do to begin to love one another as Jesus commands us? How do we dismantle our own construct of race? And, it's not as easy as being color-blind. As our speaker told us yesterday, it's about being 'color-bold'. It's about loving that person who looks different from you. For some of us of a certain age, we may not be able to dispel the notion of race from our cultural leanings, but we can change it with loving. Loving begins from the inside and flows out to others. Loving is the decision we make in our heart not to respond to someone because of their perceived race, but as Dr. Martin Luther King said in his "I Have A Dream" speech, 'by the content of their character'. This means we have to get to know each other as individuals before we come to conclusions. We can't make assumptions about each other because of our construct of race. We can only know each other by how we treat each other. And, if I treat you badly, you will not decide that I did so because I am an African American, it will be because I am a mean person. This is how we get to know each other individually, and how we deconstruct the false barriers we have built between each other using the false bricks of race. This is soul-digging work. It may require forgiveness for something that happened to you that you thought was racial. It requires us to go back to Jesus' command again and again and again to remind ourselves that we must love to be his friend. Because to be Jesus' friend is to be complete in the fullness of the love that God intended for us. To be Jesus' friend is to love with the love that God put in our hearts when we were created in God's image. The love is already there. We don't have

to go looking for it. All we have to do is use it as God intended for us, which is to use it on each other.

Andrew Smeltz shared an interesting article with me from the popular NPR series *On Being* with Krista Tippett. (onbeing.org. September 10, 2014. 4:32 pm) In this article the writer shared five ways we can learn to love each other without making racial assumptions:

The first is to ‘people watch’ when you’re in a crowded place like a mall or in the city. Notice what people look like, what they do. Imagine their life story. Practice empathy. Enjoy diversity.’

The second is to strike up a conversation with someone in a more intimate situation, like in a coffee shop. Go beyond talking about the weather, and push your talking a little deeper. Don’t agree or disagree, but ask more questions about what they say. You are showing that you care about what they say.

Reach out for new people in your neighborhood. Offer an open hand of help and neighborliness to them.

If someone holds different political beliefs from you, tell them you learn by listening, not by arguing. Don’t comment. Just listen.

Finally if you hear something hateful, tell the speaker that what he or she said was hurtful to you, that you value everyone’s humanity.

These are all ways of practicing sacrificial love that lead us to friendship with Christ, and knowing what God wants us to know.

When the Rev, Absalom Jones died, February 13, 1818, Bishop William White, the first Bishop of the Episcopal Church who ordained him to the priesthood, noted at his funeral how Rev. Jones had been a pillar in the African American community, and a friend to the City of Philadelphia. He didn't just love the people who looked like him, but gave his love to all. The Rev. Absalom Jones was a friend of Christ. Amen.