

Good morning beloved Saints of St. Thomas and St. Peter's! What an honor it is to stand in this pulpit today on the Feast of Blessed Absalom Jones-gotta confess I am more than a little nervous. Huge thanks to Fr. Shaw and to each of you for this invitation. Huge thanks also to the Rev. Sarah Hedgis, my partner in crime, who let me bounce ideas off her-with me, it takes a village to craft a sermon... And, I am going to go ahead and name the white elephant in the room, that I, a White woman, representing the church where Blessed Absalom was brought to worship while enslaved by Benjamin Wynkoop, am preaching here. What an extraordinary invitation of grace and love this is. Though it makes me wonder what I, a White woman representing a White church, a church and a culture who have rarely extended grace or love to Black people and people of color, could possibly have to say to you about Blessed Absalom, about the Gospel.

I'm going to start by demonstrating this because, while I know I don't need to tell the people of St. Thomas about Absalom, I'm going to ask you to bear with me a moment while I offer a brief outline of his life for the rest of us. Blessed Absalom was born into slavery in 1746 in Sussex County, Delaware, and, at the age of 16, Benjamin Wynkoop sold the plantation,

along with Absalom's mother, sister, and five brothers, and moved to Philadelphia- talking Absalom with him. Absalom married a woman named Mary Hunter (who was also enslaved by a St. Peter's parishioner), and in an act of selfless love, worked to buy her freedom before thinking of his own. But despite having the money to buy his freedom, for years Wynkoop would not let him purchase it, until finally, in 1784 he freed Absalom by granting him a manumission. Absalom lived into and out of a deep faith in God, coming to church at Christ Church and St. Peter's (which were one parish at the time), eventually leaving the Episcopal Church and worshipping at St. George's Methodist Church until, threatened by an influx of Black people, that church, in a move that St. Peter's had long done, decided to segregate Black people into the gallery (which, ironically these devoted black members had raised money to build in order to accommodate all the new church members)- literally trying to shove Jones into the balcony. Now, I don't know about you, but at that point, I would likely find all sorts of good reasons to abandon the church completely, but he did not. He persisted, eventually returning to the Episcopal Church and becoming the first Black man to be ordained in the Episcopal Church and founding St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. And if the Church, the world, really reflected God's love and justice, the story would have ended happily-in peace and

harmony. But, given that we have a distinct tendency to create God in our own image, confusing our wills with God's, after he was ordained, Absalom was mistreated by White clergy. But his tenacity for God did not let White apathy or aggression stop him. And, driven by his faith, Absalom made his voice, his truth, heard even when his was the only voice speaking truth to the mighty and powerful. He worked tirelessly for abolition; he cared for people struck with Yellow Fever during the epidemic of 1793, literally putting his life on the line out of love. Absalom died on Feb 13, 1818 and is interred here, in the high altar.

So that's the bare bones of the story, insofar as you can capture a life in a paragraph. It is a story of grace and courage, of evil and banality, of injustice and love. It is a cross shaped story-one that should horrify, one that definitely inspires, and one that has the capacity to transform. The piece of this story that continues to haunt me, that God keeps pestering me about, is this: 'What if'? There's the obvious but necessary "what if" question: What if the evil of slavery and its reverberations had never existed? But this universal strikes a hauntingly personal chord when I ask, What if the people of St. Peter's had, in 1794, acted out of the bedrock truth of God- that all people are created in God's image and that the amazing

diversity of creation, the many shades of community, is a reflection of the beautiful diversity within God's own being? What if we had repented of the sins of slavery and segregation, convicted, but even more transformed by Blessed Absalom's witness? What if, secure and strengthened in that knowledge, and acting out of justice and love, we had joined with the people of St. Thomas - showing the world with our hands and feet, our whole selves, what love actually looks like? What God's dream for the world looks like? The dream of a world alive with real freedom- one that recognized that those who were "free" were actually imprisoned by a lie- the lie of one human being's inherent superiority over another. And actual freedom for those literally imprisoned, enslaved, by White fear and greed. What would that kind of freedom, that freedom of love, meant for Philadelphia, for the newborn United States of America? What if the White clergy had stood with Absalom rather than ignoring, belittling, or demeaning him? What if we had joined him in petitioning Congress in response to the Fugitive Slaves Act-asking them, as he did, to "adopt some remedy for an evil of such magnitude"?

To do so would have meant an actual commitment to the Gospel over any other commitment. A commitment to the understanding that love is not a warm fuzzy feeling, or even liking anyone, it is a choice, an action-

demonstrated in hands and feet, in these marvelous and flawed bodies with which we have been blessed. To do so would have meant acknowledging that love is dangerous, risky-as Absalom well knew. Putting others before self, as Absalom did. Yet we did not. And because of that, and hundreds of thousands of other choices, born not of love, but of fear and prejudice, choices from the small and daily, to the large and systemic, the Episcopal Church, this nation, continued on a course in direct opposition to God's dream. And look where it has brought us. We are now reaping the seeds we have sown. Yes, Absalom sowed seeds that resulted in this beautiful, Spirit filled congregation, yet our churches are still divided, with Sunday morning being the most segregated hour in America. And we are being torn apart by the fact that Black people are treated as not fully human by all our systems of empire. Torn apart by White people, White systems, stoking hatred, refusing to hear the truths of history, the truths of today, refusing to see the vast chasms of inequality we have created and perpetuate. What an unGodly mess. What if?

What if we lived our lives now according to a different narrative? Not the scripts we write for ourselves, not the stories we tell ourselves and others to perpetuate walls and divisions: those stories that we shape and in turn

shape us. What if we, like Absalom, wrote a different script than the one we are handed-choosing instead to write a story of dignity, truth, justice, and love- all rooted in Christ?

What stories do we tell ourselves about ourselves and the world that may not be true? Even seemingly inconsequential stories have power-up until I was prepping for this sermon and came across an article by St. Thomas' historian Art Sudler, I took it as fact the story I had long heard that St. Peter's is where Blessed Absalom was ordained Deacon as well as other parts of his story which turn out to be either flat out wrong, or for which there is no evidence. I have so much to learn and unlearn. So many stories of Black people have been co-opted by White people and White churches.

There are as many different stories in this room as there are people. And there are overarching narratives that guide us, guide how we are in the world. As Christians, though, our call is clear- the only narrative we are to shape our lives by is Christ. The story of all encompassing, boundary breaking, outsider loving, empire busting, lie disrupting, liberating and life-giving love. It is a story that is willing to hear and bear the truth- ugly truths we would prefer to hide. It is a story that tirelessly seeks justice- true justice rooted in the essential truth of the dignity of every human being. It is

a story that is based in grace- the knowledge that we are always given another chance- the opportunity to do differently, to *be* differently, to not be controlled by the false stories we tell ourselves and that compete for our attention.

It is a story of ultimate redemption- not cheap grace-but redemption predicated by honesty, truth-telling, restitution, and reconciliation.

We stand here today, the people of St. Thomas and St. Peter's- born of different narratives. Our congregations have different legacies, different challenges, to be sure, but we have a common call. A call rooted in the Gospel truth, Gospel justice, and Gospel love. And while no church community is perfect, I have to name that St. Peter's legacy, our historical decisions about what narrative to choose, stands as a stumbling block to this call. We must, and are committed to, listening to the parts of that call we have long ignored. A call that requires truth telling- even and especially when it is uncomfortable. A call that requires us to hear the truth of others, even and especially when it is uncomfortable. A call that requires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. A call that requires us to, like Absalom, live our lives according to God's script and God's script alone.

What might our lives look like if we, you and I, lived that way? What might the world look like if we, these two congregations with a fraught but shared past, lived together that way? What if we helped each other carry Absalom's mantle of tenacious faith and tireless love? What if we picked up our crosses and followed wherever Christ leads? We know that when we open our hearts and lives to God - to these questions, these scary and costly but ultimately freeing questions - God shows us that way. And so: What if? Amen? / What if? Amen? / What if? Amen? All God's people say, Amen.