

This morning we celebrate the life and ministry of The Reverend Absalom Jones, a community leader, activist, and the first Black American priest ordained in The Episcopal Church. Every chapter of Absalom Jones' life embodies the teachings of Jesus and the calling of a priest: To love God and to love God's people. He did this against all odds. As Womanist theologians put it, made a way out of no way.

How did Jones do it? Find a way? Keep the faith? Not punch someone in the face? Like, a lot. I don't know about you, but every year, when we hear Jones' story, it's hard for me not to get caught up in my awe for someone like Absalom Jones.

Do we celebrate Absalom Jones to be in awe of him? Lord knows he deserves it. But, if he were alive today, I have to think Absalom Jones wouldn't want us to be in awe of him as much as he would want us to learn from and follow him. He was like Jesus in that way.

What if our celebration of Blessed Absalom wasn't to pay tribute, but to pay attention? Not to commemorate his ministry but to continue it? To let his life influence how we live today? To commit to proclaiming the Gospel that makes a way out of no way?

Make a way out of no way.

We have to be careful here. Because "make a way out of no way" is not some rags-to-riches or pull yourself up by your bootstraps theology. In those frameworks, the goal is to become what you were told you could never be. To acquire what those with power over you have always had.

Making a way out of no way is not about assimilation, accommodation, or appropriation. It is always about liberation. Not becoming what you were told you could never be, but knowing and holding tight to who you are and your inherent dignity and purpose. Make a way out of no way is what happens when this unshakeable belief comes alive.

What is the "way" here? It's known by many names that Christians alone cannot claim or cling to. But we have heard it like this: I am the way, the truth, the life. The

transformational experience of something bigger than yourself and yet intimately and ultimately connected to you. It's our Isaiah passage. It is fullness of life. And it is intended for everyone.

The "no way" is the struggle. It's all that stands in opposition to this fullness of life. You might be thinking of your own struggles now. The "no way" is not the absence of a path, or the need for a path to be created or conquered. It's not, "There is no way to get there." It's, "There is *no way* you're getting there." For Absalom, as a Black American, he faced a system of struggle, a system carefully maintained by white supremacy. Just as his descendants do today. There is no way I'm going to let you learn to read. To buy your freedom. There is no way you can sit here, drink from this fountain. There is no way you'll cast a vote. There is no way you are going to survive this traffic stop. There is no way you are going to see the mom you are calling out for.

Part of making a way out of no way is facing the struggle. The other part is telling the truth about it. This is the Passion story, isn't it?

Jesus moved towards the people's struggles, even when it led to his own. Brought before the powerful, he neither accommodated their anger nor appeased their fear. Grounded only in the knowledge of God's love for him, he spoke truth to power. In our gospel today, he tells the disciples they will also have to do this. Face the struggle and tell the truth about it, in love. It will cost you. And it will free you.

Absalom did the same at every crucial part of his life. He saved up money to buy freedom, not his own freedom but to free his wife, Mary. So she could be free, yes. And also so their children would never live a day of their lives enslaved. He faced the ruthlessness of slavery, and told the truth of it with selflessness. With love. With faith that choosing his wife, his children, his neighbor did not have to mean the end for him. No greater love.

The other part of make a way of out no way is this: You bring others along with you. Why did Jesus heal Romans and talk with Samaritans? Forgive Peter, teach Mary, welcome the person next to him into paradise? Why did Harriet Tubman risk her life time and again? Why did Martin Luther King Jr. go to Memphis? Because they knew in the deepest part of themselves that, for better or worse, none of us is free until all of us

are free. We make a way together. It is a truth I can miss or avoid because, in the world as it is, I am free, enough. The systems work for me, well enough.

“[But] I plead with you,” Paul writes – Paul, who held power by way of his ethnicity and citizenship, and understood what it would look like to be free enough more than we often recognize – *that* Paul writes, “[But] I plead with you, then, in the name of our Redeemer, to lead a life worthy of your calling...There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called into one hope when you were called. 5 There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all.” That oneing is the freedom of God’s way. That oneing is our calling. Not some cheap freedom, where my safety and importance relies on someone else’s struggle.

And so when Absalom saw a way to freedom, he brought along his wife. He brought along the people at St. George’s. He brought along the Episcopal Church. Praise God! What if we taught this? To everyone, from catechumens to seminarians?

Not that St. Thomas was admitted into the Episcopal Church, not that Absalom Jones was finally allowed to be ordained by the Episcopal Church. Who is the center in that history? Instead, what if we believed that when the Episcopal Church was stuck, adding more mile markers to the “no way” of oppression, doing the opposite of loving our neighbor, that Absalom Jones reached out his hand and said, “Follow me. I’ll bring you along. Let’s get free together.”

The last part of make a way out of no way I’ll talk about today is the part where you receive God’s grace and let it change you. Grace is always given freely. Painfully and confusingly so. I felt that last Sunday at St. Thomas. We were invited because of our connection to Absalom Jones. Y’all, our connection is that his enslaver was a member here! We are a part of the “no way” Absalom had to struggle with. How do we explain or make up for that history? What was so overwhelming and almost unbearable is that we didn’t have to do anything to be invited. We didn’t earn it. St. Thomas gave it to us freely. They welcomed us. They gave us seats that were never afforded to Blessed Absalom by St. Peter’s. All while resisting the cultural temptation to center the White people or history in that space. This was unapologetically their celebration. Their music. Their preaching. Their service length. The grace is that we were invited in, to participate

fully. The question for us is, were we able to receive it? And how will we let it change us?

Only then will we begin to learn what it is to make a way out of no way. To find the confidence - the faith - to live as Jesus commands and as Absalom Jones did. Only then, do we truly honor Jones and join him in the work of proclaiming the gospel. May it be so. Amen.