

Sermon: Love One Another
Feast of Absalom Jones, transferred
John 15:12-15

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Emmanuel Church, Staunton
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Love one another as I have loved you.

Here are some children's comments about what love looks like that I came across this week. Bobby, age 7, "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and just listen." (a budding contemplative!) Lauren, age 4 says, "I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all of her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones." Nikka, age 6, "If you want to learn to love better you should start with a friend you hate." And then there was the four-year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old man's yard, climbed onto his lap and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing. I just helped him cry."

"Love one another as I have loved you." These are Jesus' words to his disciples. He goes on to say, "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down's one's life for one's friends."

Today we are celebrating the Feast of Absalom Jones. In keeping with our theme of Becoming Beloved Community, a concept where all are valued and none discriminated against, it seems important to focus on the church's role in racial justice and injustice over the years. Absalom Jones was the first black person ordained as an Episcopal priest. He was born into slavery in 1746. He taught himself to read out of the New Testament. In Philadelphia he attended night school that was operated by the Quakers. After first buying his wife's freedom, he eventually bought his own freedom in 1784.

Absalom served as a lay minister for the Black membership at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. When he and his friend Richard Allen successfully increased the Black membership through evangelism, the vestry was so alarmed they decide to segregate Blacks to an upstairs gallery, without notifying them. On a Sunday when the ushers tried to put them in their new place, the group indignantly walked out. Many organized as the African Church. Eventually Absalom's friend Richard Allen began the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen Chapel A.M.E. here in Staunton is named after him. Absalom Jones was ordained as an Episcopal priest by Bishop William White, and founded St. Thomas Church in Philadelphia. With his mild manner he denounced slavery. Absalom Jones is honored and recognized as someone with persistent faith in God and an example in the Church as God's instrument. He "made a way out of no way" as the common saying goes within the Black community.

While sometimes the Church is right on target in addressing the important things of God, sometimes the Church gets it quite wrong. And the church needs to be able to acknowledge its errors so that it can begin to make things right. In the years during slavery there were plenty of Episcopal clergy who owned slaves and certainly condoned the practice, sometimes citing biblical teaching as their justification, but there were also church leaders who opposed the institution. During the Civil War the church avoided an official stand on slavery, possibly

because of the high value the church placed on unity. Economic self-interest was also at play. We may have been taught that there was a tidy split between those opposed to slavery in the north and those supporting it in the south, but it wasn't that simple. There were northern clergy who supported and defended the practice, and plenty of clergy in the south who strongly opposed it.

My seminary in Alexandria, VA, the Virginia Theological Seminary, like much of the rest of the church, has a complex and multifaceted past. While much of the seminary's history indicates a powerful thread of God's grace, there are examples of human frailty and failure. The seminary made use of enslaved labor, and participated in Jim Crow segregation. Current Dean Ian Markham said recently, "When you're talking about something as heinous as slavery, there's no amount(of resources?) really that can actually satisfy that sin. It's just too enormous. But we're going to do the hard work, recognizing our past is full of sin and grace."¹

Last year the seminary announced a historic reparations initiative. With a \$1.7 million endowment, the seminary will fund about \$70,000 a year on efforts toward making things right. They have said, "No amount of money could ever compensate for the massive injustice that was perpetrated. Nevertheless, it is important to provide a material offering for atonement of sin with very real economic and structural consequences..." Some of the money will go to support ministry projects led by African American alumni, particularly those serving predominantly Black congregations and communities, to assist in raising up African American clergy in the Episcopal Church; and to support other projects promoting justice and inclusion."²

Just this week, Bishop Andrew Doyle of the Diocese of Texas presented a vision of a racial justice initiative for individuals and communities who were directly injured in his diocese. Their research showed among other injustices that the first church there was built by slaves and the first bishop was a slave owner. The diocese is making a \$13 million commitment toward reparations. When our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry heard about this effort he said it took his breath away, and felt it was God inspired.

It's not easy to talk about racism in general, much less the church's role in it, but it's an issue we need to be willing to talk about. We can learn from our past to not keep silent but speak up when we witness injustice. In a recent conversation I had with an elementary school teacher in Northern Virginia about racial reconciliation, she had this wisdom to share. "We have an opportunity to love people who are different in a way that God would want. It is a privilege to learn, to move out of our comfort zone and let the fear go. When we move toward racial reconciliation, and really begin to learn about people who are different than ourselves, we can help each other heal." She went on to say that the work of racial reconciliation is one of the most sacred efforts we can undertake – to be who God wants us to be."

So today, I appeal to you to do something toward racial healing. You may wonder what you can do. There's a lot you can do! First you can pray. Pray for racial healing and justice. That is no small thing. You can read. In next week's bulletin I will have a list of books that can help us better understand our history so that we can better understand our present situation. You can talk

¹ Virginia Theological Seminary Magazine, Winter, 2020

² Ibid.

to Black people in this community, ask and then listen to what their experience has been in this community. You can give money to organizations that promote education, including Episcopal historically Black schools, St. Augustine's in Raleigh, NC and Voorhees College in Denmark, SC. Right here in the Queen City you can get involved with Building Bridges for the Greater Good. Whatever we do, like Absalom Jones, we should all be open to learning and accepting the truth, and then open to be healers and repairers, traveling the way of love. The Church, both this Emmanuel Church as well as the greater Church, won't always get it right - but we can try. We must try! For that is what love looks like. And that is God at work in us.

Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Amen