

SERMON 915

February 11, 2015

Feast of Absalom Jones

984th Week as Priest

811th Week at St Dunstan's

76th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

SHALL WE OVERCOME?

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

The Feast of Absalom Jones marks the ordination of the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church, and the sad reality is that the Rev. Absalom Jones is still one of precious few African Americans to be made a priest in our part of Christ's One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

In fact, there are no African American priests in the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama currently serving in parochial ministry. None. The Rev. Brandt Montgomery was the first black man to be raised up in our diocese in fifty years to be ordained a priest, and he has left for greener pastures to shepherd. The Rev. Liston A. Garfield retired from St. Andrew's in Tuskegee after twenty years as their rector and chaplain.

The Rev. Dianne Hill is not in a parish church, and there are no other African American priests to be found in our diocese. There are deacons, however, which is a good sign—but I am convinced that we need priests in our pulpits and at our tables, African American priests, who will speak the truth in love and call this people of God to reconciliation and renewal, to repentance and new life in Christ.

There is so much work to do that I wonder if much will actually change in the remainder of my lifetime. And there seems to be so little proactive effort being expended to make of us—the one hundred parishes, campus ministries, and worshipping communities that are the Diocese of Alabama—the Beloved Community that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about in his day.

We have a Commission on Ministry that seems to have a preconceived (and very white, liberal, upper middle class) vision of what an Episcopal priest should be (and should look like). Back in the day, the Bishop talked with his clergy, found young men whom he thought would make good priests, called them, and sent them to seminary. It wasn't a perfect system, but it allowed the Bishop a latitude that doesn't exist today. In the twenty-first century, we have a group of clergy and lay people

who send people through such a gauntlet of social, psychological, and theological obstacles, such an inquisition of orthodoxy, that they seem designed to turn people down, to un-choose them for ordained ministry—unless they meet the stereotype that they have already formed. And thus, we have no black priests and no plans for black priests. It's simply a fact, and anyone can look at the record over the past century to verify its truth. This will mean, inexorably, that we will have fewer and fewer African Americans in our churches, and we will become whiter, wealthier, better educated, smaller, and more convinced of our superiority as Christians. It is frankly a travesty.

And here is my best example. Three years ago, we presented an African American woman to the Bishop as an aspirant for Holy Orders. She was a rural sociologist with degrees from Florida A&M and Cornell University. She had a Master's of Divinity from a recognized seminary, and held a PhD in Religious Ethics from Emory University in Atlanta. She was extraordinarily talented, highly intellectual, and deeply committed to the Christian faith. She was turned down by the Commission on Ministry because she could not agree to relocate to another part of our Diocese. Her husband, an ordained Episcopal deacon, is a tenured full professor at

Auburn University. She now serves as a professor and administrator at Tuskegee University, and associate minister at the Tuskegee Chapel. I married this couple, presented them for Confirmation, and baptized their daughter. And the Diocese of Alabama rejected them, over the Bishop's recommendation. I believe this was a characteristic, subtle, well-behaved, polite form of racism. It is a structural, institutional form of prejudice that has formed over generations and has been buttressed by a pervasive but largely-unrecognized sense of White Privilege.

For sixteen years, we have celebrated an annual weekend to honor the Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Worker and Martyr—probably the greatest Christian of the twentieth century. St. Dunstan's has been the *only* Episcopal church in Alabama to do such a thing. We have showcased bishops and black preachers, our common stories, and our hopes for the future. We have held town meetings, discussion panels, forums, and musical events. We have involved the faculty and students of Auburn University, and we have been a part of the university's week-long celebration of King Week. We have tackled tough issues and brought to light the forgotten and hidden stories of discrimination, violence, and oppression.

And yet, no other Episcopal Church in Alabama except St. Andrew's in Tuskegee (and in the earliest years, Holy Trinity in Auburn) has joined us. The Rev. Jack Alvey, the new priest at St. Paul's in Selma, is planning a celebration of reconciliation with the black churches in Selma, and a walk to the Edmund Pettis Bridge on Palm Sunday, and that's very good to see. But it sure has taken a long, long time.

We have a lot to overcome. Anglicans were responsible for the purchase of the first African slaves at Jamestown in 1619. Episcopalians were among those wealthy business and land owners who were chiefly responsible for the slave trade that thrived in Bristol, Rhode Island, before the Civil War. Episcopalians were among those plantation owners in the Old South who used the Bible as their theological basis for slavery. Episcopal bishops Carpenter and Murray were among those who wrote Martin Luther King, Jr.—asking him to stop the demonstrations, abandon the march to Montgomery, and take slow progress over turmoil and dissent. Dr. King's response was the now famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

The Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) was created by General Convention in the late

1950s to remove racial barriers within the Episcopal Church. But opposition from southern bishops prevented the Church from taking a strong stand on Civil Rights before the mid-1960s. The most outspoken opponent of ESCRU was the Rt. Rev. Charles C. J. Carpenter, who said, "Civil disobedience ... is just another name for lawlessness."

Shall we overcome? Well, things are going to have to change. And yes, we have seen some important changes in these United States. For the first time in our history, we have in Barack Obama an African American president (in his second term, no less). Yes, it looks likely that we may have in the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry the first African American presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. These are good things. But we need a change in the hearts and minds of our church leaders, our clergy, and the people in the pews—and we need more than lip service, and commissions and workshops about racism.

We need African American priests in our Episcopal churches. AMEN.