

The Rev. Laura Palmer
St. Martin's in the Fields
February 12th, 2023
Year A Epiphany 6

As I Have Loved You

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

“If I know Ovid, may I keep my children?” a young slave in Massachusetts wrote who was enslaved at the same time as Absalom Jones, the saint we’re honoring today, Blessed Absalom.

There was no way their paths could have crossed. She was sold or kidnapped in West Africa, brought across an ocean a ship name Phillis and sold for “a trifle” because she was sickly and the ship’s captain thought she’d die. Because she was missing her front teeth, her age was listed as “7” Her new owner named her after the transport shipt—Phillis—

Absalom Jones was about 14. He was born into slavery in Delaware.

While their lives were never entwined, their legacies are. We honor and praise Absalom Jones because he was the first African-American Episcopal priest, a prominent abolitionist, and powerful preacher.

Phyllis Wheatley is the first African-American woman to publish a book of poetry. “Her name was a household word among literate colonists,” according to the Poetry Foundation, “and her achievements, a catalyst for the fledgling antislavery movement.”¹ She drew on the Bible for much of her imagery.

Admired by George Washington her work was mocked and dismissed by none other than Thomas Jefferson. We know that he had slaves, had children with one of his slaves, Sally Hemmings, but there’s still a biting cruelty reading his actual words.

¹Poetry Foundation, “Phillis Wheatley,” 2023

Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.²

“If I know Ovid may I keep my children?” Wheatley asked in a letter never sent.

That question reveals the fear burning within her despite a life with a prominent Boston family who educated her – she spoke Latin and Greek—and helped her publish a book of poetry at 21 that was celebrated here and England.

The Wheatleys freed her after her book was published then died a year later. She married briefly and unhappily, lived in poverty and never published a second book of poems, for which she’d written more than 100. Even knowing Ovid, she was unable to keep her three children, who died in infancy. She and her third baby were buried in the same unmarked grave.

Phyllis Wheatley came into public consciousness for many through the extraordinary 1619 Project, a tour de force Pulitzer Prize winning book that’s taken me nearly a year to read because it’s overwhelming in scope and in pain. It depicts the totality of what his country was built on beyond the noble ideas of liberty and equality—the systemic exploitation of African-Americans, a gruesome and evil history, hiding in plain sight—like the glorious stained-glass window behind us which contains a panel with a dark-skinned boy with sitting at the feet of a white colonist.

Absalom Jones was more fortunate – if that’s the right word-- than his contemporary Phillis Wheatley. He taught himself to read in part by studying the New Testament. Jones might have been quite familiar with today’s Gospel passage – simple words with a profound message--“Love one another as I have loved you.” He’d certainly live the out its truth in the decades to come.

Jones’ mother and six siblings were sold when he was 16. Jones’ master brought him to Philadelphia and where he worked during the day and was allowed to attend a Quaker school at night. He married Mary King while still enslaved in 1770 and would later buy his wife’s freedom before his own because the mother’s enslaved status determined that of the children’s.

²Jefferson, Thomas, (1781) “Notes on the State of Virginia,” p.284

The year Phillis Wheatley died at 31—1784—was the year Absalom Jones was freed and his life began to take off. He was 38 and had become licensed to preach-- with his friend Richard Allen at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia an integrated parish. Their evangelism was contagious. The black congregation grew rapidly. The rest of the church felt uncomfortable and the blacks were asked to sit in the balcony which they did, briefly. After the first prayer when they walked out.

The two men then diverged theologically but remained friends. Richard Allen became the first African-American to be ordained in the Methodist Church. Blessed Absalom, created The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia in 1794, and in 1802, became the first African American Episcopal priest.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is preaching there this morning. In anticipation of that he said:

Absalom Jones did much of his work during the time of the Yellow Fever, a pandemic that hit this country and caused sickness, hardship, and death. In that time of pandemic, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, drove ambulances, took care of the sick, didn't flee the city but stayed in the city to be instruments of God's healing. They did that to heal the body, their work to make the church, the church for all people, all of God's children are welcomed cherished and empowered and sent forth to bear witness to God's love, the way of love as Jesus taught us.³

“As I have loved you,” is the way of love Jesus taught us. It is a fierce and fearless love, unconditional and costly. How often do we miss, or choose to ignore, the stakes of this love?

Jesus was not giving us a tip to live our “best lives” in Oprah-speak. He gave us a *commandment*. There is no greater love than the willingness to lay down's one life for a friend as Jones and Allen and so many other African Americans were willing to do during the Yellow Fever pandemic—it's estimated 20 times more Blacks worked to save victims than whites, many of whom fled the cities. PPE, vaccines, masks, antibiotics were still hundreds of years away.

³Curry, Michael, The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, <https://youtu.be/4tvaFPGc3h0>

This is loving *as I have loved you*. Jesus promises us that if we do this, we will be his friends we will know him, as he is known by God.

The shining light of Absalom Jones reflects the light of Christ that so clearly burned in him. As it did, no doubt, in Phillis Wheatley, who died, as one of the very least of these.

The horror in her question, “If I know Ovid, may I keep my children?” can’t be contained or explained, but it can stir inside us, as it does me, as a reminder of all the work that still needs to be done and that saints like Absalom Jones and saviors like Jesus Christ, can’t do it alone.

AMEN