

**Sermon Preached at the Absalom Jones Service
Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City, NY
February 14, 2015**

By

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My sincere gratitude to those responsible for inviting me to preach today as we meet as the Diocese of Long Island, in our Cathedral, to honor Absalom Jones, a man of God and one of unwavering faith.

Let me begin by reading a passage from St. Luke's Gospel, Chapter 9:1-6, 10-11

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. ³He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. ⁴Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.

⁵Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.' ⁶They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

10 On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. ¹¹When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

This passage is one of the most exciting and dramatic in our Scriptures. Let's look at the plot.

ACT 1: Jesus calls his disciples together and empowers them for a mission that he is giving them. He gives them *"power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases"*.

1. This is a new for them. "Does this mean that we are going to be like Jesus, doing what he did - helping people in need? Healing the sick? There must have been a lot of excitement, and yes some reservation. "Will we measure up?"
2. He gives them a lesson in what I call "Divine Dependency" - *'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic.'*

Now this is what I call trust. Is he serious or just testing us? How can we go into the unknown without even a change of clothes? "God will provide." Is that for real? When I'm going anywhere I take a suitcase with everything that I will possibly need.

Each year we at St. Augustine's go on a cruise.

This year fifty four of us are flying to Dubai, and cruising to Oman, India, Malaysia and Singapore. Let me tell you, each person is taking at least two large suitcases, and believe me, some are going to be buying another suitcase before getting back to New York. I wonder if Jesus really understands how folks from Brooklyn travel? Don't take anything for the journey? Depend on others? Really, Lord, are you serious? But yes. He is serious. Whenever God calls us to do something, God has already prepared the way for us.

3. Next, Jesus gives them a lesson in Hospitality. Wherever I send you I have already made a way for you. There are persons along the way who will care for you and your needs. Be mindful of them. Look out for every expression of kindness and accept it with graciousness. Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.
4. But be mindful of those who do not show hospitality. You will also encounter them. Let them know that there are dire consequences for those who do not accept the messengers of God. Shake the dust from off your feet as a testimony against them.
5. Finally, Jesus sends them out, and off they went.
6. Did you notice that Luke did not use "disciples", but rather, he said "apostles". That is significant. Up until now they were students, learners. Now

Jesus believed that they were ready for the mission. They were ready to go out and do the work for which he had been preparing them.

Now they are apostles - "persons who are sent".

ACT 2: Luke does not give us the details of what happens once they left Jesus' presence, once they began their mission. All he writes is that they "*went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere*". - so we will have to write the script.

ACT 3: The return of the twelve and their report to Jesus.

Let us take dramatic licenses and imagine for a while what they reported.

I can almost hear Peter say, "I'll go first. Lord you told us not to take anything for the journey - *no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.* I must confess that I was not sure about that, but We did what you told us to do. We told people that the Kingdom of God is among them. We healed the sick, and Lord, many people were most welcoming. They prepared so many things for us. Sometimes we could not even eat all that they prepared. They gave us jerk pork, rice and peas, ackee and salt fish, black pudding, souse, coconut bread, caviar, and wines like White Zinfandale. One person even offered us Chateauneuf-du-Pape, and do you know what Judas asked? If instead of spending

so much on a bottle of wine, could they not have given the money to the poor?

But Lord, there were times when I got so mad. I could hardly contain myself. It was as if they wanted to kill us.

You know you have some crazy people out there. If things do not go the way they want they get upset.

Well, to be honest I wanted to call down fire on them, but Andrew reminded me of what you said to us,

‘Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’

It is really hard to turn the other cheek. I don't know how you do it.

Then Jesus looked over, and asked, what about you dear Absalom?

He said: "Lord I thought that St. George's Methodist Church was inclusive so my friend Richard Allen and I became lay leaders there, and we worked. We visited the sick. We prayed for people who were being treated as less than humans. We taught the children to read. We helped people in their fields, and the black membership grew by leaps and bounds. We worshipped. But we did much more than that. We worked tirelessly in the community because we realized that we do not do mission because we are the church, rather we are the church because there is a mission.

Absalom looked at Jesus and added, to quote our dear Bishop Provenzano, "The concept of parish as neighborhood – and not merely the church building – has become the focus of our attention and planning."

So, Lord, knowing that the majority of our work lay outside of the walls of the building, Richard and I organized the Free African Society as a social, political and humanitarian organization helping widows and orphans and assisting in sick relief and burial expenses. Lord, you and Bishop Provenzano would have been pleased with how we were involved in the community.

But Lord, one Sunday, as we were on our knees praying in church, I felt someone touch me on my shoulder. In the middle of my prayer I stopped, looked up to see an usher leaning over me, telling me that we had to leave the naïve of the church and relocate to the balcony. We could no longer sit where the good white folks sat.

So when we had finished praying all of us got up from our knees, because, we used to kneel, not just perch at the edge of our seats and bend forward, walked out of the church and shook the dust from off our feet, as you instructed, and together we started The African Church. Later, though, Richard Allen founded Bethel Church which became Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and I started The African Church

which became The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, the first black Episcopal Church in the USA."

But Absalom knew that God had called him to a special work and he would not give up. Absalom did not believe in the popular expression "It is what it is." What is, is not necessarily what God wants it to be. That's why John the Baptist said, I baptize with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

That's why on entering the temple and seeing the status quo – what was: the cheating, the dishonor, Jesus drove them out of the temple thus making the Temple into what God wanted it to be.

Like the apostles, he and Allen started with nothing except the grace of God and determination. For these persons had nothing.

I wonder how they did it. How did they build the church? We know that cake sales do not bring in much money. Judging from some of our congregations we know that people bow at the offering plate as it passes them by. Absalom must have believed what Paul said in dealing with his own thorn in the flesh

"Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more

gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Absalom must have been a man of strong abiding faith who saw his Goad as able. He knew that when God calls He equips us.

He's able, He's able, I know He's able,
I know my Lord is able to carry me thru.

He's able, He's able, I know He's able,
I know my Lord is able to carry me thru.

He healed the broken hearted and set the captive free,

He made the lame to walk again and caused the blind to see;

He's able, He's able, I know He's able,
I know my Lord is able to carry me thru.

It is now more than two thousand years since the disciples returned to give Jesus their report, and the mission has not changed: God still anoints us *"to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Or as loyal Episcopalians: "To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

It is more than two hundred years since Absalom presided at his last Mass, and the racism that faced

him then is still alive and well. It is evident in our country, the Episcopal Church and in our beloved diocese.

Never have I seen such blatant aggression and disrespect directed at a President of the USA. Never have I seen such unwillingness to work with a president. We've had presidents whose intelligence was questioned, we've had presidents whose integrity was questioned, and yet, none was ever treated with such dishonor and disdain as the current president – the reason - he is Black. But I must add quickly that neither have I seen such dignity in the face of rudeness and such majestic presence and steadfastness of purpose in the midst of racial ignorance and stupidity.

“It is what it is” cannot continue to be our refrain.

When the audit is done we will see that on the Presiding Bishop's staff, of 100 or so top level positions, with the exception of the racially specific staff positions, i.e. the persons who fill the four ethnic offices and the like, there are only about three or four persons of color. Are we to understand that the Presiding Bishop could not find qualified persons of color to fill some of those positions? Let me say as

forcefully as I can, we are more than abundantly qualified!

“It is what it is” is one of my favorite expressions, but today, I have to change that. "It is what it is" cannot continue to be our refrain.

I have pointed out to my bishop that our own diocesan staff needs to be more racially inclusive. In our congregations, we need to agree that "what's good for the goose is good for the gander". Whereas we have five black congregations with white clergy, there is no white congregation with a black priest.

“It is what it is” cannot continue to be our refrain.

The News media has been bombarding us with information about the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the death of a man in Maryland caused by the Suffragan Bishop who was allegedly drunk –

My heart rejoices at the sensitivity and care with which we are treating this bishop in her illness. And it is important that all of us understand that alcoholism is a real illness that needs ongoing attention.

However, my heart cries out at the insensitivity with which we have treated another bishop of this church

with the same dreaded disease – in this case a black man.

“It is what it is” cannot continue to be our refrain.

It is also instructive to learn that alcoholism existed in this diocese at the highest levels before, but the bearers of this unfortunate illness, were white.

“It is what it is” cannot continue to be our refrain.

I long for the day when all persons are treated with the same respect, sensitivity and care irrespective of race, culture or creed - as is due all God’s children.

Racism is one of the greatest challenges to our doing mission. But it cannot be an excuse for us not to do the mission to which the Lord calls us.

I applaud Bishop Provenzano for inviting the Diocese into what I consider holy conversations to counter racism. This is a bold and noble move because these discussions, even when managed well, can cause discomfort, uneasiness and even anger.

Recently, I read an article titled: **What my Bike has taught me about White Privilege.** I quote,

“About five years ago I decide to start riding my bike as my primary mode of transportation.

Now sometimes it's dangerous for me. If I am in the road—where I legally belong—people will yell at me to get on the sidewalk. People in cars think it's funny to roll down their window and yell something right when they get beside me. Or to splash me on purpose. People I have never met are angry at me for just being on a bike in "their" road and they let me know with colorful language and other acts of aggression. I can imagine that for people of color life in a white-majority context feels a bit like being on a bicycle in midst of traffic. They have the right to be on the road, and laws on the books to make it equitable, but that doesn't change the fact that they are on a bike in a world made for cars. Experiencing this when I'm on my bike in traffic has helped me to understand what "white privilege is really about.

I would like to suggest that this is as good a time as any, for us, as a diocese, to agree to declare racism an outlaw, to be hunted down and eliminated. I'm even going to offer a first step: That an audit be done to determine where racism exists in our structures, policies and practices.

There is however, one caution. Whereas this audit has to be authorized by the Bishop and Diocesan Council, the auditors can only be drawn from those who travel in the bike lane i.e. by those who experience racism.

Secondly, that the members of this diocese who are people of color – “Name how we have participated in our own oppression.” If we no longer had a Black Caucus, the Union of Black Episcopalians, the Asian Commission, the Native American Commission or the Hispanic Commission, would there be a difference or would business in the diocese continue as usual?

But back to sacred scriptures: *Jesus took them with him to Bethsaida –*

And this begins my final point. The crowds found out about it, they followed him;

I can just imagine how tired the disciples were after returning from the mission. I imagine that they were drained after telling Jesus all that had happened to them and all that they had done. They must have been ready for some serious R & R.

I remember attending a three-day meeting in Washington, DC. On the Saturday when the meeting ended I drove back to Brooklyn, NY. It was a grueling drive on the New Jersey Turnpike where we inched along in traffic that seemed to be going nowhere. Going through Staten Island was not much better. All I

can say is that I was exhausted tired but relieved when I finally arrived home at about 10:30 at night. As soon as I walked into the house, I showered, got dressed for bed, said my prayers and got into bed, and gave my tired body permission to sink into my very comfortable and expensive mattress, with hopes of getting a few hours sleep before getting up to get to church by 7:30 for the first mass at 8:00.

It was at that moment that my phone rang. The caller informed me that her father was dying and I needed to go and give last rites.

Her father was a member of the vestry.

Hoping that he was in a hospital close to my home, I asked, "Where is he?"

In a hospital in New Jersey. With a slight lump in my throat I asked, "Which one?" I must confess that I sighed a few times, got up, got dressed and drove back to New Jersey to do what I had to do.

I can sympathize with the disciples.

And Jesus welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

But to add insult to injury -

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a

deserted place. '13But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.'

People are always hungry for the word of God and the love of neighbor, and when they come to us, we dare not send them away. We cannot say, "the church is racist." We cannot say, "I'm tired." "You are not a member." "You don't tithe, as a matter of fact you don't give anything neither do you do anything in church but complain." Did you ever notice that the folks who contribute and work the hardest hardly ever ask for anything. But, those who contribute nothing but trouble, make the most demands, not just demands, but unreasonable demands?

But the crowds found them. Jesus welcomed the crowds, spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed to be cured.

Even as we engage the difficult persons of our time; Even as we engage the troubling issues of our time remember that we are sent to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal those who are in need of a cure, no matter how tired we get, no matter how frustrated we get, no matter how dishonored we might feel.

The Episcopal Church says of Blessed Absalom, "He was an example of persistent faith in God and in the Church, as God's instrument."

Absalom never knew what it was to give up, even when it would have been the easy thing to do. He could have remained a house slave, kissing up to the white owner to receive favors, but he didn't.

He could have remained in his ignorance, not able to read, for some say ignorance is bliss, but he didn't.

He could have remained in St. George's Methodist as a non-person, being treated as everything except a child of God, but he didn't.

He could have declared that he had arrived when he became a priest, but he didn't.

He stepped out in faith; and look at the Episcopal Church today. We are far from being perfect, but we are traveling this road to glory.

Step out in faith, because God is a good God. Step out in faith believing that racism is not ordained by God. Step out in faith and do the right thing, no matter the consequences. Step out in faith.

Let me leave the words of a song with you

I'm traveling this road to glory,

And I get weak sometimes.

Satan, he's so busy,

He's trying to slow me down.

I can't, I can't stop now,

I've come too far to turn around.

I gotta keep on, I gotta keep on climbing,

I've gotta reach my goal.

Tears in my eyes sometimes. I must keep climbing,

Friends turn their backs on me,

I must keep climbing, higher, higher, higher.

I've got to keep on, I've got to keep climbing

I've got to reach my goal.

Brothers and sisters, step out, step out in faith!