

**Sermon Delivered by
Ruby Sales
at the
Absalom Jones Celebration
Cathedral of St. John the Divine
February 10, 2018**

Good morning. This is the day that God has made. Let us rejoice in it as a moment of Grace to do today what we failed to do yesterday.

I would like to thank Bishop Andrew Dietsche, Ms. Carla Burns, Ms. Diane Pollard, the Union of Black Episcopalians, and all the participating Deacons and congregations for your effort in making this day possible and allowing me to share with you this momentous occasion of celebrating the Christian witness of our people's four-hundred-year journey in America and our special shout out to Absalom Jones.

This is Black History month. It is a season which reaffirms how far Africans and later African Americans have come by faith in this veil of tears still standing even sometimes when hope unborn had died. Black history month tells us the individual and collective stories of generations of captive and enslaved Africans whom White Europeans shackled and carried far from home and contained and held captive in sites of state sanctioned terror, dehumanization, degradation, isolation, fragmentation and commodification.

It tells a story of the bowels of these ships which were sites of terror and about other sites of terror called plantations in which our ancestors recreated themselves into a new people that extended beyond tribal lines. They based their peoplehood on their common experience, suffering, and victories. It was a peoplehood forged in captivity, dispersion, and enslavement. Put in the words of our ancestors, it told how they made a way out of no way even when they were so low down in the valley they couldn't hear anyone pray, they lifted their voices unto the hills.

Black history month reminds us how this enslaved community of Africans fashioned a liberating God and a liberating Christianity out of an Empire religion and a White racist God who favored the enslaver and gave divine permission and authority to enslave Black people. As we pour through the pages of Black history, we come face to face with spiritual geniuses who turned the fields of enslavement into subversive sites of living faith where they created a Black folk theology of radical love out of the toxic virus of hate.

These spiritual geniuses took seriously the call in the Gospel this morning to love one another. Although they were unable to control their body territory, they took complete control of their inner lives and refused to allow hate to take control of them. Radical love moved them to sing the spiritual, "I love everybody, I love everybody in my heart. And you can't make me hate you. You can't make me hate you in my heart." Because I have love in my heart, I am going to treat everybody right.

Enslaved Black people knew that a clean heart was a prerequisite for justice. They understood that White hate was a spiritual malformation that contaminated the world that White people created. They understood that spiritual malformation of hate gave rise to a social pathological world of lies and all forms of oppression. Knowing this, they set about to create a counter culture where love and right relations would be a building block for a new world coming where all God's children have a seat at the banquet table.

Their call to lay down their lives for each other was not a call to death but, rather, it was a call to commitment. It was a call to rethink the essence and meaning of one's life. It was an opportunity to ask the fundamental question, what is the nature of our work and to what cause do we commit our labor? What does it mean to go all the way for justice? Radical love asks another fundamental question – do we celebrate violence and state sanctioned murder or do we celebrate the love inherit in baptism where we cross over from individualism into community?

These spiritual geniuses knew from their own experiences, observations and witnesses as Christians that justice was a radical act of love that offers a life affirming alternative out of the dungeons of hell and release from the cynical walls of moral nihilism. It was this radical love that made generations of African Americans and their White allies put their lives, careers and economic well-being on the line to break down the walls of enslavement, de facto segregation, and southern apartheid.

Black history reminds us that Black people, as those who the psalmist wrote about this morning, were people forced into exile. Like the psalmist, they too were part of a people who sat by the waters of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion. When the wicked carried them away captivity and required of them a song, and they too asked how can we sing our song in a strange land?

This question was made even more difficult because Black people faced the daunting task of speaking our lives and our truths in a world where freedom talk, reading and writing were capital offenses punishable by death. This is the world that Absalom Jones inherited. Absalom Jones, our brother, will forever be in history as one who broke through the walls of injustice and opened new spaces that redeemed both African Americans and the soul of Christianity. We celebrate the resistance of our brother, Absalom Jones, who after fulfilling his impulse and will to be free refused to be walled in a segregated balcony in God's house by his White peers in the Methodist church.

With the same determination that allowed him to buy his wife's freedom and later his own freedom, he along with Richard Alan set the foundation for the Black Church and a Black Church Movement. Even his place within the Episcopal church as an ordained priest broke another wall in a faith tradition that stood solidly on the side of enslavement and all forms of Empire-ism. It was a church where rich enslavers sat on church pews on Sunday and went back to supervising their sites of terror on Monday.

Absalom Jones' story is more than just his story. It is a story of a people who broke through walls and opened up the spaces of democracy and Christianity. Absalom Jones died in 1818. 200 years after his death America is still building walls and developing state sanctioned sites of captivity, containment, and economic exploitation. Today President Trump stands solidly in this tradition with the Immigration Industrial Complex. It is a billion-dollar industry that waxes fat off the captivity and commodification of Black and Brown bodies and lives and their economic exploitation in sites of terror called detention centers.

President Trump's rhetoric and offer of security lulls us into forgetting that one person's wall is another person's prison. When we give the state permission to build walls that are patrolled and guarded by armed civilians, we essentially move another notch toward a police state and a closed society. By assenting to a wall to keep others out, we simultaneously and unwittingly give up our freedom and hand it over to a state sanctioned system of containment, surveillance and profiling that isolates us behind the wall on the inside from each other and the rest of the world.

This morning we face, as did Absalom Jones, new sites of terror that are being built in this country. We are witnessing rural communities as sites of desolation where the guardians of a capitalist technocracy designate them as a wasteland.

Last summer as I passed through Chadbourn, NC on my way back to New York after spending two days with mainly White rural pastors, my soul wept at the desolation represented by a Main Street filled with empty buildings and lost promises. It is a community where the guardians of a capitalist technocracy designate rural America as a wasteland where they dismiss God's poor people of all colors as unessential to the new capitalist technocratic world order where it's heartbeat and seat of financial investment and business are in cities. All other spaces are irrelevant and a burden to the technocrats. Its inhabitants are human waste to be contained in isolated sites of desolation without resources such as quality schools, Health care, hospitals, transportation and jobs.

Even as the technocrats and their allies of all colors carry out this project of desolation, isolation, dehumanization and deprivation in rural America, they are Whitening and cleaning cities not only of people of color but of poor, working class and middle class White people. While confining people of color and some Whites to these 21st century sites of desolation, they are waxing fat off the culture, our homes, food and even the Black church all of which we fashioned from years of sweat and sacrifice in communities that they once scorned and demonized as they sought new enclaves in the suburbs.

My people, I see danger ahead that will come from the frustration and anger from White people who must compete with people of color in these places for meager resources and access. I envision that the terrible White horizontal hostility and internalized oppression will meet and culminate in White violence against people of color that will be greater and bloodier than the White race riots during the Red Summer of 1919 when White response to Black

competition for jobs drove Whites citizens and immigrants in league with the police and White gangs. They invaded and carried out a bloody and murderous rampage in the Black community killing and torturing children, women and men and burning Black property from Charleston, SC to Omaha, NE.

This is the future that is being seeded in rural communities around the nation as a predatory real estate industrial complex remove Black and Brown people and poor Whites from our community causing us to disperse into these rural sites of desolation that will be hotbeds of White terrorism. This is a habitual and chronic response that Whites have learned and curated over and over again in a historical biography that is written with the ink of a spiritually malformed people socialized in a culture of fear and violence towards people of color.

This morning I ask you, the people of God, do you have eyes to see and a heart to feel and ears to hear? I ask you today is there a balm in Gilead, and if so where is it, and how might we lubricate our spirits to heal our spiritually sick and assaulted souls? Are there spiritual doctors in the land and in God's house who can write a theological prescription that raises the people of God up from our beds of affliction and disposability so that we might walk again? I want to know is there a people like my people did hundreds of years ago fashioning a living theology out of our dry bones that will give new and powerful meaning to our lives?

I believe the answer to the question is yes. I want to say this morning that even as I ask these questions, I believe that radical love has the power to turn sites of desolation into hope zones. I believe that we are not entrapped in a pit of moral nihilism. I believe that we still have enough love in our hearts to open pathways that redeem the soul of America and the heart of Christianity.

I believe this with the faith that made my ancestors keep tilling generations for the day of liberation when there was no evidence that their work would bear fruit. I believe this because I knew young men like Jonathan Daniels who got up from the king's table and went to walk besides Black sharecroppers in the fields of Alabama for freedom.

Ultimately, I concur with Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. that no lie lives forever because the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice and truth crushed to the ground shall rise again. I believe that truth is rising in our hearts this morning as we come together to remember and reaffirm Absalom Jones' commitment to breaking down walls which I believe is our commitment too. I believe that if we keep our eyes on the prize never giving up the vision of God's kingdom on earth that joy will come in the morning.

Thanks be to God.

Dr. Ruby Nell Sales



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