

**Last Epiphany
Black History Month
February 23, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Today is the Last Sunday of the Church's season of Epiphany. Ash Wednesday is this week, beginning our season of Lent. This month is also Black History Month. Last Sunday evening ... at our Black History Month Vespers service ... I shared some thoughts on the dark side of the Episcopal Church's involvement in Black History. Some who heard those remarks suggested that I share them on Sunday morning, so my apologies to those who were here at Vespers and feel it is redundant to hear this again ... but I have revised my presentation and I hope you will find it worthwhile. And my apologies to those who would rather hear a sermon on the Transfiguration.

During Black History Month we laud men and women of color for their accomplishments and contributions ... people like Fredrick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the Episcopal Church there are also men and women that we celebrate, Absolom Jones, Peter Williams Cassey, Bishop Barbara Harris, and our current Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. However, behind the individual stories of each of those outstanding people is the social, political, and church context which so often goes unmentioned. That context is the role that slavery, segregation, and racism has played in the life of this country ... and in the Episcopal Church. In that context the accomplishments and contributions of people of color only shine brighter ... the challenges that they overcame magnifies the deeds that were achieved.

So, I share this information out of a certain amount of ignorance, naiveté, and with an awareness of my own white privilege. I am sure that there are other sources of information that are much more complete, and better articulated, but this is what I have to offer this morning.

As most of us who live here in St. Augustine know, Pedro Menedez brought slaves with him on his voyage which established our city. And, there were slaves on other voyages of Spanish and Portuguese explorers prior to 1565. But, the selling of slaves from Africa began in 1619 when twenty black people were sold at Point Comfort, a port near Jamestown, Virginia. Those Africans were most likely put to work in the tobacco fields that had recently been established in the area.

Around the world, forced labor was not uncommon at that time. Africans and Europeans had been trading goods and people across the Mediterranean for centuries. However, the trans-Atlantic slave trade introduced a system of slavery that was commercialized, racialized, and

inherited. Enslaved people ... Black Africans ... were seen not as people at all, but as commodities to be bought, sold and exploited. The sale of these twenty African people set the course for what would become the institution of slavery in the United States.

The social, political, and church context for this is important. The slave trade flourished in the British colonies ... especially the South ... of what was to become our nation. The political leaders in these colonies were also the leaders of commerce, and often the leaders in the Anglican Church. In the British colonies the Anglican Church was the “established” Church ... to hold government office men had to “belong” to the Church of England.

As the colonies moved toward declaring independence from England and the Revolutionary War, this became somewhat complicated, since Church of England membership required allegiance to the King of England. After the Revolutionary War the Anglican Church in this new nation formed as the Episcopal Church, but occupied the same buildings as they had prior to the war, and with prayers for our president, rather than the king. This new “Protestant Episcopal Church” lost many of those loyal to the crown in England, yet it was still a powerful entity.

So, this is the social, political, and church context of slavery at the time this nation was formed. Over two thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglicans/Episcopalians. And, over forty of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were also slave owners. Fourteen of our presidents were slave owners before and/or during their presidency. In the South, a number of priests and bishops in the Episcopal Church also owned slaves. Yet, as powerful as the Episcopal Church was at that time, between 1792 and 1860 the Episcopal Church refused to take an official position for or against slavery, for fear of schism and from the idea that the church ought not to take any stands about secular or civil matters.

There were a few priests and bishops in the North who supported abolition, including Rev. E.M.P. Wells of Boston, Bishop Hopkins of Vermont, Bishop Whittingham of Maryland, and Bishop Phillips Brooks of Massachusetts. Yet, there were others who tried to justify both slavery and racism with reference to Scripture, including Dr. Samuel Seabury, the first American Bishop ... Bishop of Connecticut.

It was in that environment that grass root efforts by African Americans began to assert themselves. In 1786, Blacks and whites were worshipping together at St. George’s Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones ... two Black friends ... were successful evangelists, bringing in so many African-Americans that the white parishioners of St. George’s became anxious. One Sunday, without warning, all Black worshippers were asked to move to the gallery. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen remained kneeling in prayer until ushers picked them up and removed them.

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen left St. George’s and formed the Free African Society, a mutual aid society for African Americans. Eventually Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (St. Paul AME down the street is part of that denomination), and

Absalom Jones formed The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. St. Thomas was the first black Episcopal Church in the United States.

In 1794 the African Church of St. Thomas, built by the Free African Society, applied for membership in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania provided that, among other things, the church would have control over its own affairs, and that Absalom Jones could be licensed as a lay reader and eventually ordained: Jones was ordained deacon in 1795 and priest in 1802. The Feast Day of Absalom Jones is February 13.

In 1808 St. Philip's African Episcopal Church in New York City was founded by the Rev. Peter Williams, Jr., the second black person ordained in the Episcopal Church. The Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, Jr., the first Vicar of St. Cyprian's from 1900 to 1917, was the grandson of the Rev. Peter Williams Jr.

Virginia Theological Seminary was founded in 1823 by several slaveholding men, including Francis Scott Key, who wrote the national anthem. Francis Scott Key, who was a United States attorney in the District of Columbia, so opposed emancipation that he criminally prosecuted journalists who supported abolition. Francis Scott Key and the other religious founders supported the American Colonization Society, which advocated sending freed slaves back to Africa, specifically, the country of Liberia. I will say more about this later in these remarks.

Not only did Virginia Theological Seminary used slave labor, but, after slavery ended, it refused admission of Black students until 1951. In 1841, slaves owned by a construction contractor built Aspinwall Hall, a red-brick building with a stately white tower, which served as classroom space for 150 years, and now houses the seminary's administrative offices. In 2006, when the seminary's archivist went looking for records of the school's role in slavery, she also found that Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate, rented slaves to work at the seminary in 1850s, and that early professors and Virginia bishops also owned slaves.

Phillips Brooks from Boston, when he arrived at Virginia Seminary in 1856 wrote a letter home: "Of course there is nothing of the brutality of slavery here [at the Seminary], but the institution is degrading the country just as much. All the servants are slaves. Those in the seminary are let out by their masters for so much a year, paid of course to the master just as you'd pay for a horse hired."

I received my Masters of Divinity at Virginia Theological Seminary in 1975. If something had been said during my seminary studies that there was a linkage to slavery I certainly don't remember it. However, during the summer between my second and third years of seminary I worked at Sharon Chapel, a church within sight of the tower of Aspinwall Hall. Sharon Chapel was the seminary's first fieldwork site for seminarians. It was as far from Virginia Seminary as one could ride on horseback, conduct services and visit shut-ins, and return to the seminary in one day.

Several years later I was called as the Rector of Sharon Chapel. In the vestibule of the church was a rather large portrait of Phillips Brooks ... a reminder that he had served as a seminarian at Sharon Chapel before me. Phillips Brooks was the author of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and later became Rector of Trinity Church, Boston, then Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts.

In 1980, while I was the Rector of Sharon Chapel, there was a political coup in the country of Liberia in western Africa. Liberia was the country in where the American Colonization Society advocated the sending freed slaves. A Liberia Army officer had taken over the political leadership. He rounded up the President and his Cabinet and had them all shot. Only one member of the Cabinet escaped, the Attorney General name Clarence Simpson. Clarence Simpson and his family eventually settled in northern Virginia, and became members of Sharon Chapel.

In September of last year, more than a century after the last enslaved people labored on the Virginia Theological Seminary's campus, the seminary's leaders announced plans to atone for that history. They are creating a \$1.7 million reparations fund, becoming one of the first American institutions to allocate money specifically for the descendants of the enslaved. The fund will also provide financial support for black seminarians and black worshipers who experienced discrimination on campus.

On this the Last Sunday of our Epiphany season ... the Sunday before we begin Lent with Ash Wednesday ... it seems somehow appropriate to face the sins of the Episcopal Church around this issue of slavery. I really don't know what we ... here at St. Cyprian's ... can do, or should do ... if anything ... to address this issue. After all, St. Cyprian's is an Historical Black Church. St. Cyprian's is one of those Episcopal churches that was built by those African Americans living under the oppression of the brutal segregation of the Jim Crow era. We need to celebrate those who founded and built this church ... our spiritual ancestors in this sacred space. Yet even that has a dark side. St. Cyprian's was built so that the Black Episcopalians would have a place to worship, and they wouldn't bother the white Episcopalians at Trinity Parish downtown. Today we ... St. Cyprian's ... are mostly white people in the pews ... having gotten here by white privilege. I think it something for us to pray about and to ponder.

All that being said, I somehow feel the Holy Spirit is at work in all this. The genesis of this sermon was last August when I read the first installment in the New York Times series, "1619." This series, which I highly recommend, looks at the impact of slavery in our nation's history, beginning with the first boatload of twenty slaves landing at Point Comfort, Virginia in 1619 ... four hundred years ago.

Then, in September came the news that Virginia Theological Seminary was setting up an endowment for reparations to atone for its involvement in slavery. I thought then that I needed to remember that for Black History Month. And then the coincidences ... shall I say ... synchronistic events ... started to add up.

- The realization that Phillips Brooks, while a seminary student serving at a church where I would later become the Rector, was an abolitionist living and studying in an environment surrounded by slaves.
- Francis Scott Key, a founder of Virginia Seminary, was also a strong advocate for repatriating slave back to Africa in the country of Liberia ... and the former Secretary of State of Liberia was a parishioner when I served at the church where Phillips Brooks once served.
- During the Yellow Fever epidemics in Philadelphia in the 1790s, Absalom Jones, the first African American to be ordained priest in the Episcopal Church, assisted Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Chris Mason of our congregation is a direct descendant of Dr. Benjamin Rush.
- The second African American to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church was Peter Williams, Jr., the grandfather of Peter Williams Cassey, Jr., the first Vicar of this congregation ... St. Cyprian's ... from 1900 until his death in 1917.
 - Interestingly, although Peter Williams Cassey, Jr. was the first African American to be ordained in the Episcopal Church west of the Mississippi, he was ordained a deacon, and he was never ordained to the priesthood because of the Jim Crow environment in the southern Episcopal churches.
- Then, in January, Michael Curry ... our current Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church who is Black ... invited all of us in the Church to remember during this Black History Month the two remaining Historic Black Colleges affiliated with the Episcopal Church ... St. Augustine's in Raleigh, North Carolina (where I once lectured), and Voorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina.

Something tells me that the Holy Spirit is at work in this. I'm really not sure how ... or even why ... it is happening, but I am open to following where this may lead. I do know that when seen through the social, political, and church context of this nation's history, the accomplishments and contributions of Black Americans ... and Black Episcopalians ... shine brighter.

I end with a prayer from our Vespers service last Sunday:

Set us free, heavenly Father, from every bond of prejudice and fear; that, honoring the steadfast courage of Rev. Absalom Jones, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rev. Peter William Cassey, Rosa Parks, Dr. Robert B. Hayling, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and all the Black men and women in the history of our nation, we may show forth in our lives the reconciling love and true freedom of the children of God, which you have given us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Amen.