

Of Birds & Lilies

Absalom Jones Day Celebration
The Union of Black Episcopalians & The Anti-Racism Committee of the Diocese of New York
The Cathedral of St. John the Divine
Saturday, February 16, 2013

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Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.¹

This morning, with no disrespect to John,² I exercise preacher's prerogative, citing the gospel passage appointed for Absalom Jones Day back in the day of the mid-1970s when, as a student down the road at The General Theological Seminary, we began to celebrate this pioneer of our faith.

In Matthew, we read that Jesus said,

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, the body, more than clothing. Look at the birds; they do not sow or reap, yet God feeds them. Consider the lilies; they neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in his glory was not so gloriously adorned. If God so clothes the grass, which is alive today and tomorrow, thrown into the fire, will God not much more clothe you. O, you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry about what to eat, drink, or wear. Strive first for God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.”³

As I meditate afresh on Jesus' pastoral portrait of carefree birds and contented lilies, I, at first, do what I almost always do; laugh aloud to keep from weeping, overwhelmed by frustration and exasperation with the countless cares and concerns that befall us in this life, which, by comparison, make this idyllic, fanciful image utterly unintelligible. So, Jesus, be real, birds and lilies aside, our lives are beset by many burdens.

My dear New Yorkers, I live and move and have my being three blocks away from the citadel of our national legislature, the dome of which is crowned by the statue of Lady Freedom. Would that what transpires underneath reflect what she represents. Sorrowfully, the über-partisan culture of Congress, a muddled microcosm of our increasingly sectarian world *and* church, make compromise improbable and consensus impossible on a vast array of pressing issues, among them, the economy, immigration, gun laws, creation-care and climate control. Though there is no shortage of fervent voices proclaiming truth to power, the principalities remain woefully slow to hear and to heed. All the while, the disparity in wealth between whites and blacks increases;⁴ the status of 11 million

¹ Words by Daniel Iverson (1926), revised

² The appointed gospel for the day is John 15.12-15.

³ Matthew 6.25-26a, 28b-31, 33, revised

⁴ Earlier this month, scholars gathered at the African American Economic Summit, held at Howard University, Washington, DC, charted the rise in black unemployment and the decline in black homeownership and income (noting the white-black wealth disparity as more than 20 to 1. (See Washington Post article, *Financial Picture for black Americans is bleak, scholars say*, Economy & Business, Saturday, February 2, 2013, page A10.)

undocumented immigrants, many whose labor is the reason we eat what we eat and wear what we wear, languish in limbo; Newtown, Connecticut, to date, is only the latest evidence of our inability and unwillingness to curb access to weapons of mass destruction; and our still insatiable use of fossil fuels threatens to destroy “this fragile earth, our island home.”⁵

Jesus says, “Look at birds and lilies.” Again, I say, as I usually say, Jesus, be real! *And* every time, I hear my Savior answer, “I *am* real. I speak of birds and lilies because I want you to be real, too.”

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We do not come this day in worship and fellowship to dwell on our troubles, *but* we dare not forget them. For when we forget, our gathering becomes a retreat from reality. When that happens, we cannot hear Jesus. Jesus who was troubled unto death on a cross, who, therefore, knows the troubles we’ve seen, who speaks to our troubles, saying, “Look at birds and lilies” to remind us to trust God. As God provides for them, so God provides for us.

People of faith know to trust God, *but* we *also* know what Isaiah knew that God’s ways are not our ways⁶ and what Paul knew that God’s ways are inscrutable.⁷ Therefore, we *also* know that God needs supervision! God provides, but we must tell God what provisions we need, when and where. (Truth to tell, often this is what passes for prayer!) Of course, whenever we do this, we *rediscover* that God is incorrigible, refusing to play by our rules. Therefore, we trust God, *but!* And it’s that “*but*” that gives us away, O, we of little faith, for, in the face of our troubles, we waver between faith *and* fear, trust *and* trepidation.

This, I think, is why Jesus, knowing this about us, bids that we “strive first for the kingdom of God.” For the cure for care about many things is to care for one thing. God’s kingdom. No earthly or even heavenly domain, but rather God’s very life. A life of love, unconditional benevolence for all and justice, unconditional fairness with all.

When we strive for love and justice, we stand in sanctified company, surrounded by that “great cloud of witnesses.”⁸ When we strive for love and justice, we share a sacred calling, standing with the oppressed and against the oppressors. When we strive for love and justice, the intensity of the struggle sharpens our spiritual sight so to see and know what James Russell Lowell beheld and believed:

Though the cause of evil prosper, Yet ‘tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold and upon the throne be wrong,
Yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above God’s own.⁹

When we strive for love and justice, we learn anew how to say, “We trust God!”

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We come this day to honor Absalom, one who trusted God, striving for God’s kingdom of love and justice. Never one or the other. Always both. For Absalom knew that love cares for the individual, but, without justice, can ignore the corrupt system that needs transformation and justice can craft fair policy, but, without love, can ignore the individual who needs liberation.

⁵ From Eucharistic Prayer C, The Book of Common Prayer, page 370

⁶ Isaiah 55.8

⁷ Romans 11.33

⁸ Hebrews 12.1

⁹ From the poem, “*The Present Crisis*” (1845), revised

Absalom trusted God, striving for love and justice, establishing the Free African Society and later the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas for the spiritual *and* social, personal *and* political uplift of God's people.

Absalom trusted God, striving for love and justice and, so, is honored by historians as:

Zealous for the prosperity of the Church, unwearied in doing good. Especially beloved as a consequence of his devotion to the people of God, particularly the poor, the sick, and the longsuffering.¹⁰

Absalom, therefore, is a trustworthy sign for all who long to sing God's kingdom song of love and justice in the foreign land¹¹ of this world. A world whose moral economy often is bankrupt. A world whose political currency remains power in the hands of few exercising control over many.

How can we sing? As Absalom, who preached of the God who, ever acts on "behalf of (the) oppressed and distressed...as the deliverer of the innocent."¹²

How can we sing? As Absalom, who confronted institutional slavery and, speaking truth to power, demanded that all profiteers "clean their hands of slaves."

How can we sing? As Absalom, who challenged a Methodist and, then, an Episcopal Church whose policies and practices concerning people of color largely were unredemptive and unrepentant.

How can we sing? As Absalom, who condemned the damnable disparities in the church by calling the bride of Christ to be faithful as a visible, viable sign of God's kingdom.

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"Look at the birds and the lilies." Jesus calls us to trust God, work in love for justice, and so keep our eyes on the kingdom prize. We honor Absalom, whose trust was firm and vision fixed.

Even so, encompassed about by our troubles, our fears will persist in their assault on our trust in God. Many are the questions we cannot answer. What is the future of our civilization, our children, our church? How do we contend against destruction, disorder, disenfranchisement, disease, and despair? How can we persevere when the "what is" of the world continues to overwhelm the "what ought to be" of God's kingdom? How do we trust a God, whom we believe does not will, but surely allows the contradictions? Will we find God empty of promise and impotent of power? Many are the questions we cannot answer. Without answers, many lose heart.

Nevertheless, in the face of our fears, dare to sing God's song! Dare to see the world, the church, and *we ourselves* from the point of view of the end, the victory of God's kingdom, already achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus! As Absalom knew, so we will know that when we dare sing God's song, when we dare strive in love for justice for God's kingdom, we *never* are truly afraid!

¹⁰ From *Richard Allen and Absalom Jones (In honor of the Centennial of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Which Occurs in the Year 1916)*, page 7, by the Reverend George Freeman Bragg (1863-1940), Rector of St. James' Protestant Episcopal Church, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹¹ A reference to Psalm 137.4

¹² From *A Thanksgiving Sermon, preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas's, or the African Episcopal, Church, Philadelphia: On Account of the Abolition of the African slave trade, on that day, by the Congress of the United States* by the Reverend Absalom Jones.