

The Episcopal Church deserves a pat on the back! Yesterday our church remembered Blessed Absalom Jones who is an Episcopal saint. Yes, we were forward thinking enough to ordain a Black man to the priesthood in 1802. That was about 60 years before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Aren't we progressive!

But before we give ourselves too much credit, we have to realize that the reason that the Episcopal Church did so was so that Black men and women of faith could have their own parishes and not have to be part of white congregations. We were a denomination that throughout the past has segregated our congregations. A black preacher could serve the Black people and we'd be OK with that. By the way, it was 1950 before all Black Episcopal congregations achieved the right to vote at our triennial National Convention. Not so progressive.

We did a very forward thinking thing too when we consecrated the first Black bishop. His name was Edward Demby and he was consecrated in 1918. So progressive of us! We could check another thing off the list of ways in which our church was very accepting of diversity. But this also carries a stain of protecting segregation.

Bishop Demby was elected as a Suffragan Bishop. This category of bishop was designed just for this purpose. A suffragan Bishop is not eligible to be promoted to Diocesan Bishop. Bishop Demby could be the spiritual leader of all the black priests and black congregations in Alabama, but white folks did not have to worry that he might one day be elevated to the bishopric of white congregations.

Today's Gospel reading tells us of an amazing scene, especially in light of the fact that we humans don't like change very much. The disciples saw a change in Jesus right before their eyes. Their friend and wise teacher was transfigured there on the mountaintop. They saw him as never before. And they were awed, frightened, stunned, and left cowering in the brightness of the glory of Jesus. They themselves were transformed in a moment into men who knew who Jesus was: God's son. "This is my son the beloved," they heard God say, "Listen to him."

Have you and I experienced transformations? While we think to ourselves about the times in our lives in which we have had a transforming moment, let me tell you a little more about the man, former slave and Episcopal Priest, Absalom Jones.

The reason many people of color had joined our Episcopal Church in the first place, was because Anglicanism was first brought to our shores in the South from England. Some people in the south encouraged their slaves to be baptized and come to Jesus.

By 1800, when the Second Great Awakening was the new Christian movement in our country, there was even more interest in wanting to evangelize African Americans. And it was at that time the Absalom, a slave who bought his own freedom, lived and worked in Philadelphia. He taught himself to read the New Testament and he and a friend, Richard Allen, were welcomed into St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. Working together the two men greatly increased the Black membership at St. Georges. But this alarmed the vestry and the church leadership decided to segregate Black worshipers to the balcony.

Without warning one Sunday the ushers told Absalom and Richard that they, along with their fellow Black church members, must sit upstairs. As you can imagine, Absalom was quite angry about this and he and all his friends walked out of the Methodist church.

Absalom and his flock then applied to the Episcopal Church to be allowed to become a congregation with Absalom as their lay leader. They asked that, if qualified, he would be able to be ordained as their minister. That's how Bishop White came to ordain Absalom as our first Black Episcopal priest.

We still had a long way to go to be a church that fully accepted Black congregations and allowed them to have a vote. We still had a long time to go to integrate Episcopal congregations. We still had a long way to go before we began to ordain women, and LGBTQ persons to the priesthood.

We aren't now, nor will we ever be, the perfect epitome of faithfulness and understanding. Even now, when we have a Black Presiding Bishop, the wonderful Michael Curry, we still have blind spots. Racism still lurks in our churches and in our communities. Paul said in our passage today from Second Corinthians that the Gospel is veiled. Sometimes we cannot clearly see what new transformation God has in mind for us.

Let us pray together on this last Sunday in Epiphany, that more will be revealed to us. That we will be open to transformation, and that Jesus will show us the way. We pray that whatever we need to see today will be put before us and that we will receive the Gospel message of hope, compassion and peace. Let us prepare ourselves to **walk with Christ back down the mountain of Transfiguration** during Lent and Holy Week, and allow ourselves to be transformed in presence of God.

“For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” 2 Co. 4:6

Sources: *Holy Women, Holy Men*, Church Publishing, pg. 220
A Brief History of the Episcopal Church, David L. Holmes, pg. 79, 85.