
*Celebrating "'Love's Body' and Gospel Mystery every Black History Month **

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A Sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith, Priest Assoc.

In the name of God, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend! Amen.

Let me admit right from the start: What I'm about to say is a shameless promotion of our Cathedral Greek class. But I'm also here as your preacher for today. And that means I'm charged to make a shameless promotion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So I'll do that too. But finally there's a third promotion I'm obliged to make here today.

As it happens we're in the middle of Black History Month. And in fact this afternoon the people of the Diocese of Atlanta will gather in this very place for the 194th anniversary of the first African American priest ordained in our Episcopal Church, Absalom Jones. So I also find it irresistible to include blessed Absalom in our worship this morning.

I

But first, our Cathedral Greek class. There we were, seven or eight of us assembled around the discussion table in Greek class. It was two Sundays ago in fact when an interesting word came up—the Greek word for "death" or "dying." Now in my role as class leader I began searching for a way to help us remember the Greek form of this word, *thanatos*.

At first two English words came to mind. One was "eu-thansia," which means "good dying." The other is "thanatology," which is the academic study of death and dying. And then I remembered good old Sigmund Freud.

But Freud generalized the idea of the death-wish to include not only human beings but all organic life. He speculated that there is a tendency in living things to return to an earlier condition or a simpler state of being; a longing for the less complex condition that preceded our fully developed life as a mature individual; or a preference for disassembling or dissolving our highly structured existence, and giving up the intense level of energy it takes to sustain life as we know it.

So Freud's notion of the death wish is not so much about wanting destruction or denying life as it is about letting go of the tension that is a regular feature of highly evolved life. But before I could get that far in my description of Freud's theory of the death-wish I was interrupted by one of our class members.

"Freud should have spoken for himself," he said with an amiable smile.

"Oh. So you don't think that a death-wish is really universal?" I responded immediately,

"No, I don't" he answered; again in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "Maybe Freud was describing some people like his patients, but not all the rest of us."

And then I was compelled to admit, "Oh yes."

Because right then and there came to mind the American philosopher, William James, with his two categories of people.

"You're right," I acknowledged. "According to William James there are two kinds of people. There's the "healthy-minded" on the one hand, those who are reliably upbeat, cheerful and generally refuse to despair. On the other hand there are persons whom James described as having a "sick soul;" persons who are chronically dissatisfied with life, and therefore remind us where improvements remain to be achieved.

And that's where our class discussion ended. We left it there because, after all, it's a biblical Greek class! But there you see an example of the fun things that can happen in our class"fun things like using William James to improve on Freud. And there you have my first promotional pitch. Come to Greek class and you too can have fun with words!

II

And now to my next promotion. Because this Sunday we also get to improve on St. Paul in the scriptures appointed for today. It may not be as energetic as using William James to improve on Freud. However in the end it may prove far more important for us; for helping us understand the good news of the gospel as good news for us.

So let's return now to that passage we read earlier from 1st Corinthians. There we hear the apostle declare:

Athletes exercise self-control in all things . . .

[Just] So I do not run aimlessly . . .

but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming [the prize] to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9.25-27)

Now right here is another interesting word in Greek"the Greek word for "punish' in the phrase, "I punish my body and enslave it." Now as an amateur I'm surprised that our translation today uses the phrase, "'punish my body.' Even the word, "'enslave,' is very strong of course. But at least it's a literal translation of the Greek. The Greek word that get's translated as "'punish,' however, really means "'to coerce' or "'to discipline with hardship.'

Right here we can improve on the Apostle's teaching. But it's not like using William James to improve on Freud as we did in Greek class a couple of weeks ago. Rather we can use St. Paul himself to make an improvement on himself. For the Apostle himself writes quite differently in another epistle where he also reflects on how we are to treat our body.

It's in Ephesians that Paul invokes the theme of loving our body rather than punishing or disciplining it. Ephesians chapter five says:

just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,

because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'

This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5.25, 28-32)

What a contrast we have here, don't we? In 1st Corinthians today we have the metaphor of an athlete disciplining and enslaving his body in order to receive the prize of eternal life. In Ephesians instead we hear about spouses loving one

another as they love their own bodies. And furthermore we hear about the relationship between spouses described as "one flesh." Indeed, we're told that to be one flesh with one's spouse is like the union of Christ with the church as his own body; that there's a mystery here in which Christ loves and cares for the church the way each of us cares for our own body.

III

Now precisely here we are on the verge of promoting more powerfully the gospel good news as good news for us. But first I want to take a detour into my third promotion of the morning, and then come back to the gospel promotion. Because I "'gotta tell you,' Christian friends: It's impossible for me to hear that contrast between 1st Corinthians and Ephesians today and not be overwhelmed by the example of someone who combined both their themes of athletic discipline and loving union.

Indeed, as an African American preaching during Black History Month, and on this day in particular during Black History Month, when I hear these scriptures I hear them realized and exemplified in today's celebration of Absalom Jones. Although his actual death anniversary is tomorrow, February 13, we are observing it this afternoon at our 4pm service as we do every year on the nearest Sunday. And every year we recite the particulars of this iconic figure in our church history.

[Born as slave in 1746, Jones was] the first priest of African descent in the American Episcopal Church. [While a slave] he taught himself to read using the New Testament. At the age of 20 he married another slave, [Mary King,] and purchased her freedom with his earnings [so that their children would be born free]. He bought his own freedom [seven years later] in 1784.

At Saint George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, the evangelism of Absalom Jones and his friend Richard Allen resulted in greatly increased Black membership in the church. This threatened the vestry, who decided to segregate Black parishioners into an upstairs gallery without notifying them. When ushers attempted to remove them from the church, they indignantly walked out in a body.

Subsequently Jones helped organize the African Church, which applied for membership in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. The church was admitted at Saint Thomas African Episcopal Church in 1794 [10 years after Jones' hard work had enabled him to purchase his own freedom], and Bishop White ordained Jones as deacon in 1795, followed by ordination as a priest in 1802. It is this history that has led to celebration of Absalom Jones Day in many churches in the country. [Source: <http://www.episcopalpgh.org/absalom-jones-day-2009-report/>. Cf. http://en.goldenmap.com/Absalom_Jones]

However I wish to honor Blessed Absalom not only for these milestones in his biography. Rather with today's scriptures in mind I also acknowledge him as a premier example of healthy-minded athletic discipline""on the one hand. On the other hand he was also known to practice loving care and unity not exclusively with his spouse but also with his congregation.

Take first, for example, how he must have disciplined his own body in order to purchase his wife Mary's freedom and subsequently his own. In that daily struggle to commit and recommit himself, we will never know whether or not he also struggled with some version of Freud's death-wish""the impulse to just lie down, be already dead, or to never rise again.

I'm reminded here of that massive sculpture that you see on Concourse B at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. It's among the other monumental sculptures from artists living and working in Zimbabwe. It's called, "How Can I Rise," and its premier feature is a huge hand sprawled across the figure's face and covering its features as if it's ashamed. The rest of the figure, torso and legs, just lies there, prone, laid low by some calamity or debility.

Who knows, I emphasize here, how much the experience of enslavement was similarly internalized by Jones. Perhaps he, like many descendants of slavery today, struggled with moods and feelings that nowadays would be clinically diagnosed as depression or anhedonia (the opposite of hedonism)""that is, the inability to experience pleasure or satisfaction in life. Maybe he had to overcome something like that, or just live with it, in order to be the loving priest that he is reported to have been for his congregation.

Loving his body and not only disciplining it, Jones must have found a way to transmute that self-love into love of neighbor and love of the church as Christ's own body and mystical spouse.

IV

And here at last, in concert with other teachings in St. Paul's epistles about dying with Christ, here we are more fully prepared to promote the gospel good news as good news for us. For here we come upon the gospel message that in Christ there is a paschal mystery about death and dying. The word, "paschal" means suffering, and in Christian teachings we claim there is a way to suffer and die in order that we may also rise with Christ to new life"again and again and again.

Indeed there is a Lenten way to do this. And however mysterious our Easter resurrection may be, the church has passed on to us a tried and true way of Lent that leads us there; the way that we will soon re-embark upon as our Epiphany season comes to an end in the days ahead.

This paschal mystery of dying and rising with Christ is foreshadowed though not explicit in our gospel for today. In today's gospel, as in our Old Testament lesson too, God does not abhor our bodies"however diseased they are like leprosy. Nor does God shun any of us the way social stigmatism rejects some of us and prefers others of us for whatever reason. Rather Jesus says to all persons, of whatever character or makeup, the same words of embrace that he said to the leper in today's gospel: "I do choose to make you clean, and I reach out and touch you as one of my own; be healed, be whole, be mine.'

But notice this: as he touches us he also calls us to obedience and discipleship. Now in today's gospel story the healed leper disobeys Jesus command in his ecstasy to tell everyone about his miraculous healing. Nonetheless in general we are called to obedience and discipline. That call to discipleship has been memorialized in the following expression, coined famously by the WWII era Lutheran pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

When Christ calls persons to himself he bids them come and die.
[Paraphrase; <http://www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html>]

So yes, with blessed Absalom, as with so many heroes and "sheroes' of our faith, we have an exemplar of healthy-minded death and dying; the threefold dying to enslavement by the world, dying to enslavement by the flesh, and dying to enslavement by the devil. And yes, in addition we have in blessed Absalom an icon of healthy-minded discipline: disciplining our bodies as a path toward love and honor rather than punishment or abuse.

Finally, therefore, we may all be collected, with redeemed dignity and honor, by this collective prayer appointed for celebrating the life and witness of Absalom Jones:

Set us free, heavenly Father, from every bond of prejudice and fear; that, honoring the steadfast courage of your servant Absalom Jones, 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.
<http://www.lectionarypage.net/LesserFF/Feb/AbsJones.html>

* The title of this sermon echoes the title of the book, *Love's Body*, which was "originally published in 1966 and [is] now recognized as a classic. Norman O. Brown's meditation on the condition of humanity and its long fall from the grace of a natural, instinctual innocence is available once more for a new generation of readers. *Love's Body* is a continuation of the explorations begun in Brown's famous *Life Against Death*. Rounding out the trilogy is Brown's brilliant *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*." <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520071063>

In addition the sermon observes an anniversary that occurs every February in the United States which is also Black History

Month. February 13th in particular is the death anniversary of the first African American Episcopal priest ordained in U.S. history, Absalom Jones (d. 2/13/1818). Jones was born into slavery in 1746, bought his wife's freedom in 1777 and his own freedom seven years later, and became a priest in 1802 after founding St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1794.

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