



**SIGNIFICANT PRAYER EVENT #3
A Sunday in November, 1787**

My prayer is not for them (my disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. **Jesus in John 17:20-21**

Absalom Jones
1746-1818



"Wait until the prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." *Absalom Jones*



Mother Bethel AME Church
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
c. 1825

I can't remember the theologian (was it Dietrich Bonhoeffer?) who said "it has been given to the Church in the United States of America less than to any other country in the world to fulfil Jesus's prayer for the unity of Christians." Our church splits, denominational schisms, and multiplication of churches by their division are perhaps the single most American expression of the right to freedom of religion. Some of the church splits, like the great rending of mainline Christianity over slavery in the 1850's which created separate Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations, north and south, have truly been catastrophic events. A few of the church splits have been amicable and instead of tearing apart Christ's body, they have resulted in great fruit for the kingdom. This third greatest prayer event in US history produced both kinds of division—the bitter and the fruitful kind.

It all began during a prayer. It was the opening prayer of a worship service, but, other than that, no one remembers anything about the prayer itself, what it was about or who prayed it. The prayer is remembered for an apparently incidental occurrence at the back of the sanctuary. Dr. Albert Raboteau, a famous historian at Princeton University says of this moment, "The gallery incident at St. George's is undoubtedly the most famous event in African-American religious history."

St. George's was, and is, a Methodist Church (the Methodist church with the longest record of continuous service anywhere in the world). At the time, Philadelphia had the largest population of free Blacks of any city in the United States. A good number of these had responded to the preaching of two highly respected Black lay preachers, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen both of whom loved and lived the simple, heartfelt, and disciplined Christianity preached by John Wesley and his followers.

Very recently they had helped enlist the support of the Black members of St. George's Methodist to carry out a remodeling project which added a new gallery (balcony) to the sanctuary to accommodate growing numbers of people. The leadership of the Methodist Church decided that this new gallery, farther away from the pulpit than the old gallery, should be the place where the members of color were to sit, but they made the decision without informing these lay preachers. Jones, Allen, and another man entered the church right before the service began and sat where they were accustomed to sit. As the congregation dropped to their knees (in old Methodist fashion) for the opening prayer, a church trustee came up to Jones, the eldest of the three, and tried to jerk him to his feet, rudely telling him that he must move to the new area. Jones responded, "wait until the prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." The response was that no, he had to move immediately. By the time the scene concluded, so had the prayer, and the three, along with many other Black members did indeed move—not to the back of the church but out to the street to form their own church.

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones had both been slaves who had purchased their freedom at great cost and sacrifice. Jones purchased his wife's freedom first in 1770 (one source I read said that Absalom Jones and his bride were married by Jacob Duché, but I was unable to corroborate that detail), in order to guarantee that his children would be born free and that his family could not be sold away from him. He was only able to purchase his own freedom 14 years later. Richard Allen was seventeen when two very important events happened. His mother and three siblings were sold by his owner, and he never saw any of these family members again. The second event was that he heard the gospel from John Gray, a Methodist circuit rider, and Richard turned his life over to Christ. He strove to win his unbelieving master to Christ by offering an example of increased responsibility and duty. The master came to admire him so much, that he allowed Richard to invite a Black preacher by the name of Freeborn Garretson to preach at the farm. Freeborn delivered such a powerful sermon on the "writing on the wall" story in Daniel 5 in which he boldly declared that the "writing was on the wall for slaveholders who came to stand before judgment that the master was not only brought to Christ, he also came to believe that slavery was wrong. He allowed Richard to earn his way to freedom by working odd jobs in the community.

Richard Allen brought industriousness and discipline to all he undertook, and in fact eventually became a man of means. Absalom Jones brought such dignity and grace to his work that he came to be a respected man in Philadelphia and had his portrait painted by the son of Charles Wilson Peale (who had painted George Washington's portrait). The two men remained friends and collaborators throughout their lives. But they didn't remain fellow church members.

Already in 1787 the two had founded a non-denominational fellowship group they called the Free African Society. After they walked out of St. George's, they sought to

raise funds to build a church. Several white community leaders, including Dr. Benjamin Rush (friend of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and most of the other Revolutionary leaders), helped the group to raise funds. Their plans were interrupted by the great Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793. Dr. Rush was a great patriot but a terrible doctor, and he believed that Black people were immune to the disease. Therefore, he called upon Allen and Jones and their people to take care of the ill and bury the dead. Although there was one journalist that accused the African Americans of taking advantage of the situation, Jones and Allen wrote their own testimony of what their people had done during the plague and a grateful community helped them build their church.

They very quickly had their first church controversy over which denomination to belong to. They had to belong to a denomination in order to be registered with the government. St. George's Methodist still claimed them, but threatened to expel them permanently if they insisted on operating independently. Allen responded in a letter: "If you deny us your name (Methodist), you cannot seal up the Scripture from us, and deny us a name in heaven." Finally, the majority of the group voted to become Episcopalian, since the Episcopalians, seeing an opportunity to make the Methodists look bad, had been wooing them. Allen could not forsake the simple discipline of his beloved (if undeserving) Methodism and could not follow them. Jones, every bit as Methodist as Allen, nonetheless graciously acceded to remain at what became St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, becoming the first Black Episcopalian priest in US history. The church quickly grew under his leadership and came to have more than 400 members, including much of Philadelphia's Black elite.

Allen, who had a heart for reaching the poor and enslaved, had previously purchased land for the church that St. Thomas opted not to use. He had an old blacksmith's shop moved on to the property and Bethel church was born. Bishop Francis Asbury himself (Grand Old Man of American Methodism) presided at the dedication of the church, but placed the congregation under the care of the elders at St. George's—where the sentiment of even the Black members who had remained there after the walkout was that Allen was working towards segregation. They asked the Conference to take over Bethel's property. The last straw came in 1815 when St. George's elders had Bethel put up for auction. Bethel had to buy back its own church for the then exorbitant price of \$10,000. Bethel's liberation came when the courts decided it had a right to exist as a separate denomination. In 1816, Allen called several African Methodist churches together and the African Methodist Episcopal church was born (AME), with Richard Allen as the denomination's first bishop, and Bethel church became "Mother Bethel", which today still stands on the property that Allen purchased. This denomination, which today numbers 2.5 million members in the United States, was the first social institution of any size or importance in the United States that was entirely governed and led by and for people of African descent.

So who was right, Jones or Allen? I submit that, in the long and tortuous mission of Christ to redeem our country from the sins of slaveholding and racism, they both were right—each differently gifted to different but complementary ministries. Jones, who remained part of a church solidly in the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition, upheld the visible sign of the unity of the body of Christ and the idea that these churches could be transformed from within. Allen, who only cut his ties to the Methodists nearly 20 years after that interrupted prayer in the St. George's gallery, did right to create a home for African Americans to worship God in their own way and under their own leadership.

He understood that where one group seeks to cloak its oppressive dominance over another under the guise of Christian Unity, that unity becomes a sham—not the kind of loving equality that the Father and the Son enjoy in their communion. It seems that sometimes the only way forward to true unity is to take an apparent step back into division to allow the oppressed group to come to equality in Christ separately from those who have oppressed them.

If you were going to have a division, you would want it to be as amicable and productive as the division between Bethel and St. Thomas. Jones and Allen continued to work together for the cause of Black welfare and freedom. Together they petitioned Congress and the state legislature for an end to slavery, they founded several benevolence societies, organized the first Black militia to help defend Philadelphia in the war of 1812, and finally organized the opposition to the American Colonization Society which sought to solve the problem of slavery by getting Blacks to emigrate to Liberia. By different paths they both together rooted Black Christianity deep in the soil of our country as a legitimate expression of the faith.