

What could possibly have been in the minds of my French and English ancestors to think that they had the right to claim any land to which they could sail as their land, that they had the right to slaughter so many hundreds of thousands who lived in those lands, that they had the right to capture the people of those lands for slaves? These were Christian nations, acting as if they could not possibly have heard the teaching of Christ.

If, like me, you are repulsed by our national history of slavery, cruel racism, murder and oppression of others based on race, you are probably not a racist. If you look for ways to deepen relationships and move beyond ignorance with people of other races, you are not a racist. That is the good news. There is no need for private and neurotic guilt about our racially oppressive past.

But the deeper work requires moving beyond what any of us can do individually, so that we join in taking part in a struggle against a set of cultural biases toward whiteness that are so deeply ingrained in our nation's history that we cannot even recognize them. There are biases so deeply embedded in who we are as a nation that they have become as pervasive and unseen as the air we breathe.

Kelly Brown Douglas, Professor of Religion at Goucher College and an Episcopal Priest, describes a history of white assumptions in her book, *Stand Your Ground, Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. The claim of white superiority has its roots in a mindset shaped in early Europe. Anglo-Saxon culture and history asserted the claim of white supremacy over all other peoples of the earth, and those assumptions were built into our nation's founding. Slavery was certainly a manifestation of that sense, but so too were laws passed in the 1700's which defined whiteness as an essential characteristic for citizenship in the United States. So, too, were laws and practices that embedded discrimination into our history, whether in the Jim Crow laws of the south or the subtle suppression of wages and opportunities in the north.

Douglas's book, in a review of the thinking behind *Stand Your Ground* laws and the killing of Trayvon Martin, uncovers this complex but persistent history in great detail. *Stand Your Ground* is derived from a deeply ingrained belief that for a black or brown person to approach a white person without an invitation and appropriate deference is in itself a criminal act. She argues that the black body

engenders an assumption of criminality, so that any further perception of misbehavior by a black bodied person amplifies or confirms criminality. Stand Your Ground permits white anxiety to manifest in violence against black and brown people, simply because their blackness and brownness implies trouble, implies criminality. It is difficult to imagine that Trayvon Martin would have been acquitted for killing George Zimmerman simply because he felt threatened and needed to stand his own ground. Standing one's ground is an historically and deeply seated bias within the cultural assumptions of whiteness.

Even if we do not personally practice racist language or behavior, we are all part of a system in which people of black and brown skin live with a sense of fear and cautiousness that I almost never feel as a white man. I trace a series of benefits that I have received as a white man that would probably not have come so easily to me if I were a black or Hispanic or Asian man - from access to a college that honored diversity but where nearly all of us who attended were white, to relatively easy access to mortgages and the selection of my homes, to the occasions when I have been stopped by police officers who treated me with respectful deference and have always called me Sir.

We have to be willing to consider that we, who are not inclined to be racists, are still involved in a systematic racism in our nation and in our culture. Who can save us from this morass of history and assumption that persists in oppression and racist reality? Thanks be to God, it is Jesus Christ!

For at the center of the Way of Jesus Christ has been a remarkable practice of reconciliation and mutuality, produced not only by a conversion of the mind but also by a healing of the heart. Our ancient ancestors were not persecuted for believing in Jesus or the resurrection. They were persecuted because they demonstrated a new way of being a society that contradicted and contrasted the oppressive societies in which they gathered. They were persecuted precisely because they did create harmonious accord between races and classes, precisely because they conveyed worth and dignity to the oppressed poor and outcast, precisely because they conveyed authority and power to those who had been powerless and voiceless. They were persecuted because they empowered Greeks to be church leaders in the midst of Jerusalem, because they ordained slaves to be

bishops, because they defended the rights of women to own property and wealth. Few expressions were more threatening to the society of the day than Paul's proclamation that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.

Our work within the struggle against racist systems is significantly through prayer, in which we seek God's help for deep healing in our churches, so that our churches can once again stand for a contradiction and contrast to the societies in which we sit, so that once again the church may be seen in the midst of the society as gathering in which there is truly a sweet spirit of accord, in which the notion of brotherhood and sisterhood is not a bible quote but is an authentic expression of the reality at the core of who we are.

Our work within the struggle against the racist systems requires that we, the faithful, play our part as leaders and conscientious citizens speaking up for justice, speaking up for what is right. We have a part to play in asking for a serious, thoughtful and open-minded

conversation about redressing past wrongs through economic justice. We have a part to play in having open hearts, open minds, and courageous speaking to invite a serious conversation in this country about economic reparations, about being fair with those whose labor and lives have enriched so many, about how those who enriched others have a claim on back wages and an expectation that the ground needs to be leveled for all, not just for white people.

I cannot say to you that I hope you can forgive me for stealing your car, so long as your car is still parked in my driveway. Some repentance requires restitution to become authentic. We, who believe in Jesus Christ, are the people who can lead the nation into that level of seriousness about justice.

In the midst of our cathedral's observance of black history month we look back at our history, listening to what our African American brothers and a sister had to say about this new nation, founded on an imagination of all men being created equal and yet built around laws that specifically limited the benefits of this new nation for white males.

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were born into slavery in Delaware before the Revolutionary War, and both were eventually able to purchase their freedom. They were deeply convinced in their faith in Jesus Christ and began to carry out ministry and preaching among other slaves and freed blacks. Their effectiveness as ministers in their church in Philadelphia led to such dramatic church growth that one Sunday they were met at the door and told that black members would need to sit in the balcony from now on.

Leaving that church they developed their own congregation and were faithful and effective ministers. Absalom Jones sought to be ordained in the Episcopal Church, where he became the first priest of African descent in our Anglican church's history. Richard Allen would not trust that a white church would ever truly welcome the African American people, and he founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, becoming its first bishop.

Born in West Africa at about the same time as Allen and Jones, Phillis Wheatley was taken from her parents as a little girl for slavery in the United States. She became widely acclaimed and admired for her poetry even as her words undermined the assumptions that made slaveholding possible. Referred to as the delicate revolutionary, she discloses the pain and trauma of her removal from her home, the hypocrisy of ignoring the humanity of the African people. Wheatley was set free by her master upon his death.

Listen to their words as Richard Compean reads from Richard Allen's essay, "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves, and Approve the Practice;" as Deacon Doe Yates reads from Phillis Wheatley's poem, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth;" and as Ron Johnson invites us into a prayer of Absalom Jones from "A Thanksgiving Sermon," preached in thanks for the ending of slave imports into the United States.

I pray that what I have offered today has been faithful and true to the spirit of Jesus.

Readings:

The words of Richard Allen in his essay, "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves, and Approve the Practice"

"That God who knows the hearts of all men, and the propensity of a slave to hate his oppressor, hath strictly forbidden it to his chosen people, "Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land." Deut. 23. 7.

The meek and humble Jesus, the great pattern of humanity, and every other virtue that can adorn and dignify men, hath commanded to love our enemies, to do good to them that hate and despitefully use us. I feel the obligations, I wish to impress them on the minds of our colored brethren, and that we may all forgive you, as we wish to be forgiven, we think it a great mercy to have all anger and bitterness removed from our minds; I appeal to your own feelings, if it is not very disquieting to feel yourselves under dominion of wrathful disposition."

"If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slavery, burden not your children or your country with slavery, my heart has been sorry for the blood shed of the oppressors, as well as the oppressed, both appear guilty of each other's blood, in the sight of Him who hath said, He that sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."

"[Slaves] appear contented as they can in your sight, but the dreadful insurrections they have made when opportunity has offered, is enough to convince a reasonable man, that great uneasiness and not contentment, is the inhabitant of their hearts. God Himself hath pleaded their cause... Many [enslavers] have been convinced of their error, condemned their former conduct, and become zealous advocates for the cause."

A reading from a poem by Phillis Wheatley, entitled "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth"

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,

Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,

Whence flow these wishes for the common good,

By feeling hearts alone best understood, I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate

Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat: What pangs excruciating must molest, What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?

Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd

That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:

Such, such my case.

And can I then but pray Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

A reading of a prayer from a sermon by Absalom Jones, called "A Thanksgiving Sermon"

Let us pray.

Oh thou God of all the nations upon the earth!

We thank thee, that thou art no respecter of persons, and that thou hast made of one blood all nations of men. We thank thee, that thou hast appeared, in the fullness of time, in behalf of the nation from which most of the worshipping people, now before thee, are descended. We thank thee, that the sun of righteousness has at last shed his morning beams upon them.

Rend thy heavens, O Lord, and come down upon the earth; and grant that the mountains, which now obstruct the perfect day of thy goodness and mercy towards them, may flow down at thy presence. Send thy gospel; we beseech thee, among them. May the nations, which now sit in darkness, behold and rejoice in its light. May Ethiopia soon stretch out her hands unto thee, and lay hold of the gracious promise of thy everlasting covenant.

Destroy, we beseech thee, all the false religions which now prevail among them; and grant, that they may soon cast their idols, to the moles and the bats of the wilderness. O, hasten that glorious time, when the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea; when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them; and, when, instead of the thorn, shall come up the fir tree, and, instead of the brier, shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

We pray, O God, for all our friends and benefactors, in Great Britain, as well as in the United States: reward them, we beseech thee, with blessings upon earth, and prepare them to enjoy the fruits of their kindness to us, in thy everlasting kingdom in heaven: and dispose us, who are assembled in thy presence, to be always thankful for thy mercies, and to act as becomes a people who owe so much to thy goodness.

We implore thy blessing, O God, upon the President, and all who are in authority in the United States. Direct them by thy wisdom, in all their deliberations, and O save thy people from the calamities of war. Give peace in our day, we beseech thee, O thou God of peace! and grant, that this highly favoured country may continue to afford a safe and peaceful retreat from the calamities of war and slavery, for ages yet to come.

We implore all these blessings and mercies, only in the name of thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. And now, O Lord, we desire, with angels and arch-angels, and all the company of heaven, ever more to praise thee, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty: the whole earth is full of thy glory. Amen.