



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

A “History Note” from Arthur K. Sudler, Director
St. Thomas Historical Society and Archives

ABSALOM JONES AND RADICAL RECONCILIATION

People don't want to take Blessed Absalom Jones at his word. He is celebrated. He is venerated. But his own words about himself are not honored. If what Absalom said about himself is not the key source of information used to accurately tell the story of his life then he is disrespected and we are deprived of the opportunity to fully appreciate his gifts and to learn how God was using him to fulfill God's will. How Absalom gained his freedom is often a subject of misinformation. In his own words he said “My desire for freedom increased, as I knew that while I was a slave, my house and lot might be taken as the property of my master. This induced me to make many applications to [Benjamin Wynkoop] for liberty to purchase my freedom; and on the first of October, 1784, he generously gave me a manumission. I have ever since continued in his service at good wages, and I still find it my duty, both late and early, to be industrious to improve the little estate that a kind Providence has put in my hands.” Yet, it has often been written that Absalom Jones had to purchase his freedom. He could not have been more clear in what he said. How did that get twisted?

Absalom, you see, was radical. The Rev. Canon Dr. Stephanie Spellers knows something about being radical. Dr. Spellers has written several books including *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* and *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline and New Hope for Beloved Community*. Dr. Spellers has explained “radical welcome” as a way of being where someone doesn't just show hospitality to someone else who is “the other” but the invitation extended to that other person should initiate a transformative relationship between both of them. She uses the language of theologian Miroslav Volf, to suggest that it is an “embrace,” a “dance,” where both persons are engaged in the process of creating a new relational context. Absalom's description of how he got his freedom is an example of radical reconciliation – an acknowledgement that a radically transformative experience has occurred - and that a radically reconciled relationship now exists. The old superior/subordinate status has been cracked open. This doesn't mean that there isn't still room for more change. The embrace, the dance, continues. We aren't finished with each other and God isn't finished with us.