

Sermon: The Love in Friendship
14 Pentecost, Year A
Montgomery Hall Park

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“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”

What a glorious morning it is! The chill in the air has a way of waking us up! It is a happy occasion for the folks from Allen Chapel and Emmanuel Church to worship and eat together. This is our third annual event here in this park. It is a wonderful opportunity to gather together, to worship God and to renew our friendships.

Today’s passage from Romans is super clear in its sentiments. If we sometimes have a difficult time understanding what the Apostle Paul is talking about, today he makes his point crystal clear. “...for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Paul gives us the “shall nots” – You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet. And then he writes, (these) and any other commandment are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s that simple. Simple? But not easy at times, to love one’s neighbor, is it? Today I want to talk about one way God makes loving a neighbor easier and that is in the gift of friendship.

My grandmother had some pretty funny things to say sometimes. When family members were driving her crazy, she’d say, “God gave you your family and thank GOD you can choose your friends!”

Allen Chapel and Emmanuel have chosen each other as friends, and yet we are also family because of our being part of the body of Christ. There is an interesting thread of friendship though that precedes our individual churches I want to share with you – the friendship between Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. These two African American men were born as slaves in the late 1700’s, Allen in Philadelphia and Jones in Delaware. The morality of slavery was being seriously questioned. At one point Richard Allen’s so-called “master” heard a charismatic white preacher preach. He preached that slave owners were “*weighed in the balance, and... found wanting;*’ *The slave owner ‘believed himself to be one of that number, and after that he could not be satisfied to hold slaves, believing it wrong.’* Richard Allen was on the way to freedom.

After Allen’s religious conversion, he joined the Methodist Society and preached to the black congregants at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Absalom Jones was also a lay preacher there. Allen eventually felt the need to build a church building for his congregation, an idea rejected by many of the white members as well as many of the black citizens of the city, but supported by his friend and colleague Absalom Jones. Together (in 1787) they, with assistance from Quakers and Episcopalians, formed the Free African Society, a non-denominational religious mutual aid society for the black community that supported the emancipation of slaves and supported widows and orphans. By 1794 this society had grown into the African Church. This must have been where the two split off to lead in their individual denominations.

The African Church applied to become part of the Episcopal Church under the condition that the African Church be received as an organized body and that they have control over their own affairs, and that Jones be made a priest if he had met the suitable requirements. So Jones became the first black priest in America. Allen continued his Methodist ministry, and founded Bethel, which became the "Mother" church of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the first independent black denomination in America. While they separated by denomination, Allen and Jones remained life-long friends and collaborators and powerful civil and spiritual leaders.

Friendship can be seen as a gift from God. What are some of the benefits of friendship? (shared joy, companionship, not alone, help us become who we are meant to be, help us to see more clearly, etc.)

A friend is a gift, and yet a gift that needs to be received well and nurtured.

Hold a true friend with both of your hands. ~Nigerian proverb

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born. ~Anais Nin

When one member suffers, all members suffer with it, when one member is honored, all members rejoice with it. (1Cor. 12:26)

Friendship improves happiness, and abates misery, by doubling our joy and dividing our grief.
~Joseph Addison

There is much I don't know about Richard Allen and Absalom Jones' friendship but it seems that they gave one another spiritual support in pursuing the things that matter to God; specifically ending slavery and pursuing freedom and dignity and respect for all people; the care of the widow, the orphan, the sick, the persecuted - preaching the Gospel in word and deed.

Could we not support one another in the things that matter to God? Fulfilling God's law by loving one another? I wonder if we can build up our friendship by sharing a common mission, to serve God by waking up to new ways of loving, new ways of listening, new ways of learning from one another. Today after the service I want to strongly encourage you to find someone you have not yet met and share with them one worry or hurt you have and one joy, and commit that you will pray for them throughout the week. Let's allow this sharing, this friendship, to truly divide our sorrow and double our joy. Friendship is God's gift, one that must be received as well as given.

Creative and loving God, you have given us a great gift in friendship, in our heritage of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Help us to love the friends in our lives, those we have known and who have known us for a very long time as well as those friends who have not yet come across our path. Help us to be God bearers to one another, to love and honor, to share in joys as well as in sorrow, to treat as holy these amazing treasures we call friends. Amen.

Sources: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p97.html>
https://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/leadership/jones.php

