



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri

<https://www.diocesemo.org/podcast>

Episode 002: Seeking Christ in all persons through the arts

Adrienne Dillon and Christian Davis, members of the Dismantling Racism Commission, and on the 2017 Absalom Jones event planning team

The Rev. Harry Leip, deacon, Trinity Episcopal Church, CWE, St. Louis

Harry Leip:

Welcome to JesusHacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Harry Leip, deacon at Trinity Episcopal Church in the central west end of St. Louis, Missouri. I want to begin our podcast today with a brief history lesson. In 1804, Absalom Jones became the first African American person ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church. Much later in 1973, his feast day was added to the Episcopal Church calendar on February 13th, the day of his death. In our own diocese for many good number of years, the Dismantling Racism Commission has hosted various celebrations on his feast day, and this year is no exception. That's what we're going to chat about today.

I'm very, very happy to welcome Adrienne Dillon, a member of the commission and also Christian Davis, a member of the commission and former president of the Diocesan Youth Advisory Council, who's also hosting this event this year. We're going to talk about this year's event, and their perspectives on the gathering. I'd like to welcome you both. Adrienne I'd like to start with you. Can

you give us a little bit of background on the life of Absalom Jones from your perspective, and about how the work of the Dismantling Racism Commission and this event sort of interweaves his life into that message?

Adrienne Dillon: Absalom Jones as you said was the first African American to be ordained as a Episcopal priest. He and his friend Richard Allen had belonged to a church that was mostly white, but started to gather an African American group of people. The church became uncomfortable with this group, and one Sunday morning, told them all that they had to either go to the balcony or they had to leave, and they all left, and they formed their own congregation. It was some years later that Absalom Jones was ordained as a priest and many years after that, before their congregation was admitted as a parish into the diocese. We honor him every year, usually it is close to his day February 13th, this time it's going to be somewhat later in the month. It's going to be February 25th at Emmanuel Church from nine until one, and lunch is included. Our theme is **Seeking Christ in All People Through the Arts**, and we will give people a chance to experience various forms of art from other cultures, so that they can get a feeling of what it would be like to worship in the arts of various cultures.

Harry Leip: Great. Thank you for that. I'm intrigued. Christian, if you can say a couple of things from your perspective that that theme, Seeking Christ in All Persons Through the Arts. I find that really fascinating to think about that and study that as a community gather. Can you share with us just your brief perspective on the intersection between art and seeking Christ.

Chris Davis: Sure. In a church, there are many icons, lots of music, and not all of it is representative of the Episcopal Church. What I mean by that is, many icons in churches that I've grown up in are depicting white people. Much of the music I've heard in the churches I've grown up in have been written by white composers, Europeans, in that genre and style of music. What I've found myself doing is having an image of God that is very strict, very linear, and very individualistic in some regard. That I'm looking at a mirror and seeing a white guy, and that's not God. God is challenging. God is an image that is much more colorful than one white guy, and so art influences how we look at God. We've got to start looking at our art in a different way and maybe even changing or adding art to be more representative of what the image of God actually is.

Harry Leip: It sounds like there's a real conversation to be had around art and how it influences our idea of the individual, and also sort of using art as a mirror about who we are as a people, and what we think about God. It sounds like, and Adrienne I think I'm giving this to you. It sounds like the gathering will allow that to sort of happen with everyone who attends that event at the end of this month.

Adrienne Dillon: I think it will. We will have an opportunity to explore such things as spirituals and liturgical dance, and talk about what it means to experience these things. Somebody told me that when she saw a picture of an angel who appeared to be

a person of color, that this changed her life. Because it made her think that she might identify with one of these holy beings.

Harry Leip: It sounds like maybe stepping into a new experience gives as an opportunity to widen our perspective, even if it takes us a bit out of our comfort area.

Adrienne Dillon: I think it is, and I think that it would be important for those who are not people of color to become aware, that there are other perspectives.

Harry Leip: Right. It sounds like that rethinking of identity, and seeing identity through different eyes is perhaps one of the ongoing works of the commission. Adrienne I know you've been a longtime member of that. How does this gathering continue the work of the commission as you've seen it through the years?

Adrienne Dillon: It's interesting that you mentioned the overall effect of seeing things from another perspective. In our two-day training, one of the earlier stages of it is that we speak to each other in pairs, in order to compare our life experiences so that white people can hear the experience of people of color, and the people of color hear the experiences of white people. We move from there by various steps to an understanding of racism as a system, as something that involves really all of our life together, and we have to start by understanding how our experiences might be different.

Harry Leip: Thank you for that. Speaking on how our experiences are different, I'm really excited that this year continues, and I cannot remember if it's been for one or several years, that this event is co-hosted by the Diocesan Youth Advisory Council which I know makes many of us, probably Adrienne primarily yourself very happy about that. Christian can you talk about how that sort of came to be, and how the youth council is getting involved with co-hosting this event?

Chris Davis: Well I think it's been a few years now that we've slowly been integrating sort of together to become more multi-generational in our material and our display of our material. Sort of how we spread our message and that sort of thing, we still have got a lot of work in that department but it's happening. It's happening slowly, but it's happening.

Harry Leip: It's happening. That's great. Adrienne is it true from my understanding that this is something that the commission has wanted in your info for a while, this idea of multi-generational hands-together, working and studying?

Adrienne Dillon: Yes we have been making an effort to get younger people involved. The membership of the church in general is getting older, and in fact, the population in general is getting older. But if the church is going to do ministry with people who are not elderly, we need to get some younger people involved.

Harry Leip: Of course. Of course. I'm assuming as always that the activities and everything that the commission is up to, I mean also the youth advisory council is on the

diocesan website if people care to learn more about what you are doing. With St. Louis being at the epicenter of the recent events in Ferguson in the ongoing national witness of groups like Black Lives Matter and others, Adrienne, I'd like your perspective on how this event, and this remembrance of Absalom Jones that we have every year, helps us in our ongoing work as a community--where we find it really hard to talk about race and privilege. How does this help us in ways big and small?

Adrienne Dillon: It's the commission's intent to create opportunities to have exactly these dialogs, and I think it's especially important that we have them in the current political climate. It's important that we try to hear each other, try to understand each other, because it's very easy, I think, to get captivated by the rhetoric that is happening on one side or the other, to get locked into our own patterns of thought, and we really need to get outside of those and try to understand.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. Christian, for this event, can you give us a little bit of the write down of logistics of the event. If someone's not attended before, what is the gathering going to be like for that morning from 9 o'clock to 1PM?

Chris Davis: Well, everyone is going to arrive. We're going to start in the sanctuary at Emmanuel Church in Webster Groves, so we can look at the art in an actual sanctuary. Then we're going to leave in song. We're going to sing out of **Lift Every Voice and Sing**, and we'll adjourn to the common area, I'm not sure what Emmanuel's name for their common space is. Just begin conversation, and art, the liturgical dancers of All Saints' have generously accepted to perform. We'll break off, have workshops on different art mediums and, always tying it back into the influence of art on the image of God, how that can either connect people, and connect people in God, or it can divide people through having a singular image.

Harry Leip: Right. You mentioned conversation, and I know right now with such a difficult political atmosphere, and many communities struggling, conversation is the one thing that people will say you know, "I'm a bit afraid. I'm afraid of offending. I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time which is never my intension." For both of you, how does this event sort of help the conversation move forward and help sort break down those divisions that sort of keep us not having those conversations? I know that's kind of abstract, but what sort of conversations will you all be having during the gathering?

Adrienne Dillon: I think we're going to start with activities that are actively structured. As we begin in the sanctuary, we'll have some brief presentations and sing some hymns. There is one hymn for example that tells the whole story of Absalom Jones, and Christian mentioned **Lift Every Voice and Sing**, the hymnal, the title song of that is number one, and we're planning to sing it. This was written by James Weldon Johnson, and the music by his brother Rosamond, and at one point it was known as the Negro National Anthem. Some schools actually sang it in place of the Star-Spangled Banner, because it tells in a very moving way some of the struggles that have happened.

We will gather in the parish hall for some more presentations, before we break up into the groups for the workshops, where again we will talk about specific artistic activities. At that point then we can have more free flowing conversations, and we expect to continue those conversations into lunch, and lunch will be provided.

Harry Leip: Great. It sounds like that's very much a common thread between this gathering and the work of the commission, to have those conversations, at times difficult and very honest ones. For somebody who's not familiar, what advice or what do you tell them, or what guidelines would you say that helps us to start having those difficult conversations that we continue to struggle with?

Adrienne Dillon: In our two-day training we start by establishing ground rules, and we take some time with this but basically, you could perhaps sum all the ground rules by saying, we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We need to listen with respect. We need to realize that we're all here to learn, that nobody understands everything perfectly, and we ought to be patient with each other.

Harry Leip: Also it sounds like we also have those conversations in community, with community.

Adrienne Dillon: Absolutely. We're building community the more we have these conversations.

Chris Davis: I think also with conversation, it's important that we bring a willingness to step outside our comfort zone, you're never going to be 100% comfortable in the situation you got experienced. Sometimes the conversation won't move forward because we're too fearful to say anything. It's the stepping outside and having a willingness to learn and to speak.

Harry Leip: It sounds like also taking a risk to have those conversations and become vulnerable in those conversations to the truth from another perspective.

Adrienne Dillon: There is some vulnerability and it takes a certain amount of courage to go ahead and open yourself, and be willing to consider the other perspectives.

Harry Leip: Right. Christian for our last question, I'd like to ask from your experience, you're helping work on, and plan this event, so why is this important to you as a young person of the Episcopal church?

Chris Davis: Well, I think it's important that young people, and older than young people, I don't know the exact age realms for those two words, but that we all team up to educate ourselves and the people around us so we can talk about it together. Because it's something that's happening on all age levels, all age groups, and it happens differently. Racism in older generations is different than racism in a younger generation, so we have to look in different levels in how our age sort of changes the stereotypes and type of oppression. I think it's just ... I don't know. I enjoy working with older people, and I think all other younger people would

enjoy that too. I think it's just the need to go towards a mixture of age, a mixture of material display.

Harry Leip:

Great. Adrienne and Christian thank you so much for being here. Just a quick reminder Seeking Christ in All Persons Through the Arts is the theme of this year's Absalom Jones celebrations, which is at Emmanuel Church in Webster Groves on February 25th. It's from 9 o'clock in the morning to 1 PM. There is no cost. Lunch is provided. Please RSVP online and you can find details on it, and many other things at the diocesan website at diocesemo.org.