

The Kingdom of God Means A Seat At the Table

By Felicia V. Gaddis



Kara Walker

The Palmetto Libretto (part two of a multi part work. This one's a sketch for an American comic opera with shipwreck and cargo), 2012

Pastel and graphite on paper

3 parts, overall framed dimensions: 102.75 x 215.25 inches (261 x 546.7 cm)

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When I was asked to write an article about Black Episcopalians and our place in the kingdom of God and our role in bringing the kingdom of God, I immediately thought of this work by Kara Walker because in understanding how we have come to be Black Episcopalians in America I believe we must first understand how we got here, not just to our nation's shores, but how we have arrived at this place in time.

Walker's, *The Palmetto Libretto (part two of a multi-part work. This one's a sketch for an American comic opera with shipwreck and cargo)* (and yes, that is the accurate title) is a meditation on the Middle Passage.

Her use of heavy strokes and depiction of knarled bodies littering the ocean floor are in stark contrast to the heavenly rays of light piercing the water's surface. The use of light and shadow convey two ideas, the despair of a watery grave and the hope of salvation represented by the shafts of light and the hands reaching into the water to collect the souls of those departed.

Walker's work speaks for those that died on the slave ships, were thrown overboard, or who jumped into the Atlantic on the journey to the New World. It speaks for the ones that didn't make it. These were husbands, fathers, siblings, wives, mothers, daughters, and sons. They were loved by someone and had dreams of becoming someone. The slave trade took all of that from them. All of that was lost.

So many souls were lost on the journey from Africa to the Americas, that the migratory patterns of sharks in the Atlantic changed to take advantage of the feast the transatlantic slave trade provided for them.¹ And this brings me to the souls of those who ultimately did make that arduous journey.

As Black Episcopalians, we are the diaspora of those who survived the middle passage. In some cases, we are the descendants of those who enslaved us. Upon our arrival, we were converted to our captor's religion and found that even in the bleakest of circumstances, the love of Christ was greater than our condition and stronger than the chains that bound us.

We found that even when the Anglican missionary group, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, crafted an oath for potential black converts allowing them baptism with the condition that they were not seeking freedom, God's word was greater.²

The ratification of the 13th Amendment realized the dreams, labor, and prayers of men like Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, who worked tirelessly to manifest God's kingdom for black people in this nation. We had experienced what Jesus meant when he preached from the book of Isaiah, saying,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
–Luke 4:18-19³

In the 158 years since the ratification of the 13th Amendment, we have seen numerous setbacks and successes. The advent of Jim Crow laws in the south brought about institutional segregation of Episcopal congregations and an attempt at the 1883 general convention to mandate segregation at the national level. Known as the Sewanee Canon, the proposition failed that year, but southern bishops created colored convocations to enact locally what they could not impose nationally.

¹ *Commemorating The 200th Anniversary Of The Abolition Of The Transatlantic Slave Trade*; Congressional Record Vol. 153, No. 70; House - May 1, 2007; Daily Edition
<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-153/issue-70/house-section/article/H4232-2?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22sharks%22%5D%7D&s=8&r=13>

² *The Black Experience in the Episcopal Church* by Lydia T. Wright, M.D.
<https://Episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/awakening/item/103>

³ Bible Gateway King James version,
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+4%3A18-19&version=KJV>

Black Episcopalians made great strides during The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The movement ended the segregated congregation in the south, and the last "colored Convocation" took place in 1954.⁴ The Episcopal Church advanced the Kingdom of God by giving its black members a seat at the table.

Today, we, as a church, are experiencing another setback. Our numbers are dwindling. Our congregations are aging, with the most significant age demographic being those over 65.⁵

As racial and social tensions flare up in our society at large, how can we, as Episcopalians, and especially Black Episcopalians respond in a way that will revive and invigorate our churches, our community, and our faith?

We have indeed come this far by faith. Absalom Jones's faith caused him to walk out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal church and found the St. Thomas African Protestant Episcopal Church. It was the faith of Jones and Richard Allen that caused them to organize a corp of nurses and burial teams during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793.

As we move forward in the future, it would be good to look to our past to examine what propelled us forward. For Black Episcopalians, what has moved us forward has always been our faith in Jesus, who is just and has sustained us when we moved in faith.

Christ's unfailing love liberated us from the chains of bondage. Christ's unfailing love led us and sustained us through the turmoil of the civil rights era, and it will be his unfailing love that guides us into the future.

We owe it to all those who didn't make it to these shores to live lives that they could only dream about and, in some cases, to live lives they couldn't even imagine. We owe it to them to be the best of all that God has placed in us. We owe it to them to make the places we inhabit just and good and right because no one did it for them.

Let us use our faith to manifest the kingdom of God, accept our seat at the table spoken of in Luke 14, and invite others to join us.

⁴ *Racial Concerns in the Episcopal Church Since 1973*, by Authur T. Lewis; Anglican and Episcopal History , December 1998, Vol. 67, No. 4, PITTSBURGH CONFERENCE PAPERS: "MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY": ANGLICAN VISIONS OF APOCALYPSE AND OF HOPE, JUNE 1997 (December 1998), pp. 467-479
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42611978>

⁵ *Religious Landscape Study: Members of the Episcopal Church*; Pew Research Center 2014
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/Episcopal-church/>