

## Civil Rights Pilgrimage: Day 1 – Wednesday, May 31 From the Rev. Mary Laymon

What an amazing week it's already been.

Yesterday, in a gesture of tremendous generosity, I was invited to pray for Mr. Stewart at an airport sendoff before he boarded his plane for Atlanta, and then headed on to France.

The Vice-Mayor of Cincinnati joined us, declaring May 30, 2023 "Mr. Richard Stewart Day" in honor of Mr. Stewart's service to his country. I learned he was one of only three African-Americans invited to participate in the Normandy Anniversary events in France. Forty-five Americans total will be a part of this international gathering.



What a moving morning to see young service men and women honor Mr. Stewart with their presence and respect.

You can read more about this amazing celebration, and see the news story here: <https://www.wlwt.com/article/cincinnati-wwii-veteran-travels-to-normandy/44041068#>

Today, fourteen pilgrims met at the same airport to take the same flight to Atlanta Mr. Stewart took yesterday. Seven of us were from St. Simon's. Our first stop after the airport was lunch at the iconic Varsity burger diner across the street from Georgia Tech.



But the highlight of our day was our visit to the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. Dr. Catherine Meeks, director of the center, spent more than two hours sharing her wisdom with us. It's hard to capture all of it, but some memorable moments include:

- “I don’t believe in Racial Reconciliation. Reconciliation assumes there was a good racial relationship to go back to. There was never a good relationship... not in Jim Crow, not in slavery, not on slave ships, not in kidnapping humans from their homelands. At the Absalom Jones Center we insist instead on supporting racial healing. That is what we need. Healing for a relationship that has always been broken, not reconciliation.”
- The story she shared about deciding to honor the more than 900 people lynched in Georgia by placing a monument with all their names on it in front of Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. She told us about the resistance she experienced from the community who asked her the “WHY” question. When challenged by folks who ask her “Why is it necessary. Why do you keep dredging up the past?” she responds:
  - “When we deal with our racial history head-on we don’t have to keep doing this work. When we don’t deal with it head-on, we have to keep dealing with it”

- Her wish: That Episcopal churches all over the nation remember the lynched in their region by putting markers on their property. There were lynchings in every part of the country.

- “Racial healing work is not about politics, psychology, sociology, etc. Racial Healing is about saving our souls. When you don’t want to do this work, you don’t want to be well. We can’t become who God created us to become when we remain consumed by hate and fear. Wellness is about



being willing to tear down all the things that contribute to our separateness. We are one body, but we do not live like we are. How do you become one body? You sit in a room together and tell each other the truth. What do you love? What hurts you? Hear my story... hear my truth. Let you see me... let me see you.” Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” It really will. Racial Healing is sacred work.

- Because we are named after Absalom Jones, we have to be committed to as much disruption as possible. We tell the best truth we can here. Truths like: “we are a nation committed to genocide” that’s what we do... we kill people if we want what they have.

I can’t imagine a better way to begin our pilgrimage than with the wisdom of Dr. Meeks. She spoke truth to us, and then sent us off to encounter those truths in their many embodiments along our journey.

We ended our first day by breaking bread together at Mary Mac’s Tea Room, a historic Atlanta restaurant famous for its Soul Food and good Southern cooking. As we enjoyed crackling corn bread and Pot Likker, shrimp and grits and fried green tomatoes, Georgia Peach Cobbler and Ice Cream, we learned more about one another’s stories. Already Spirit is forming us into a pilgrim community. We are no longer strangers, but companions on a wisdom way, engaging in the soul work that will make us well.

I'm grateful to be on this journey with so many good people from St. Simon's. I look forward to sharing in the days ahead what Spirit is stirring up in us.

Shalom,  
Pastor Mary