

## **“Celebrating the Spirit of Kwanzaa”**

Thank you, Nathaniel! We need to be reminded of the joy, the fun, that comes from being involved with other good people in something worthwhile!

That describes my own experience in putting this service together with your mother, Kathleen. Her energy infused our whole committee. She put the Order of Service together single-handedly.

Every year, Kwanzaa means more to me. I'm grateful for the generosity of the African American community in allowing us to celebrate your rich heritage with you, for sharing the inspired tradition of "Calling on Our Ancestors." Patrick Brown will be leading us in this ritual later in our service.

Acknowledging the ancestors calls to mind one unforgettable moment in the film "Amistad." Thanks to Steven Spielberg for bringing one of the most significant moments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the screen. Many of you may remember the story about an 1839 mutiny aboard the Amistad, a slave ship traveling toward the northeast coast of America. Much of the film involves a courtroom drama about Cinque, the African who led the revolt. One of the team of lawyers defending the Amistad rebels was John Quincy Adams, a former U. S. President.

In the film, Adams asks Cinque before they enter the courtroom if he is nervous. The leader of the revolt answers, "No, because my ancestors will be present with me." I will never forget that scene. It has inspired me to remember that my own ancestors—mother, father, sisters, brothers—are with me when I'm in this pulpit or just beginning an ordinary day. It helps to have their pictures on my bedroom wall. Just as I am strengthened by my connections with our faith community, I draw courage from being in communion with my loved ones who have moved into another dimension of being.

Thanks to Cinque's ancestors as well as to John Quincy Adams, and the legal team, the Amistad Africans won their freedom in arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1841. It's interesting to note that at first the former president resisted the request to argue the case. He excused himself on the basis of age, 74, and infirmity. Eventually, he agreed given his passionate belief in the rightness of the cause. Once he had committed himself, Adams wrote in his diary, October of 1840, "I implore the mercy of God to control my temper, to enlighten my soul, and to give me utterance that I may prove myself in every respect equal to the task."

Ultimately, the Amistad case energized the fledgling abolitionist movement and intensified conflict over slavery. As well, it prompted a former president to go before the Supreme Court and condemn the policies of a present administration, President Martin Van Buren was no abolitionist. He was eager to return the ship and its cargo back to Spain.

One would wish that former presidents were as outspoken today. According to a recent report on the legacy of Gerald Ford, this former president told Bob Woodward in a 2004

interview that he totally disagreed with the Bush/Cheney policy, saying that the U.S. should never have attacked Iraq. Unfortunately, Ford would not allow Woodward to divulge this part of the interview until after his death. If only he had been as enlightened as John Quincy Adams!

In times like our own, we need to maintain the "Optimism of Uncertainty." Let's recall some of the lessons that Howard Zinn offered in Nathaniel's reading: "Don't let 'those who have power' intimidate you. No matter how much power they have, they cannot prevent you from . . . thinking independently, from speaking your mind. . . . Find people who share your values and commitments and who also have a sense of humor.

May the Spirit of Kwanzaa sustain us in commitment to its principles. May we find people who share these values and who know how to celebrate them with drumming and dance in the good company of Jeh Kulu. Take it away, Jeh Kulu!