

A Bigger Table (Summer Saints 2021: Sojourner Truth)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 27, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

(Galatians 3:23-29, NRSV)

Last Sunday, we began our Summer Saints series with a focus on the Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard. We saw how he demonstrates for us beautifully how gospel Truth is not just about objective facts – it is rather a Truth that addresses us and seizes us at the core of our being, giving us something for which we can live and die.

This Sunday, we encounter one who adopted Truth as her last name: the 19th century abolitionist, women's rights advocate, and social reformer Sojourner Truth. Hers was a most remarkable life, inspired so thoroughly by her faith ... a life of *witnessing* to the Truth and believing that through the Spirit the Truth had the power to change the world. In her vision, the Spirit had been unleashed in the world, and that meant (to use Lincoln's famous words) a "new birth of freedom" for the enslaved and the formerly enslaved ... for women of all races ... and for all people crying out for life and hope.

She was born Isabella Baumfree, born into slavery in 1797 in upstate New York, in an area that culturally was still under strong Dutch influence, and so the Dutch language was in fact the "language at home" of the first families she served – and thus, her own first language as well.

As a child, she was bought and sold four times, and began to learn English only when she was sold the last time at the age of 11. In these years of shifting households, she was no stranger to harsh physical labor and violent punishments. In her teens, she was united with an older enslaved man with whom she had five children, beginning in 1815.

Growing up largely alone on a farm with little contact with other black folk, but with a deep spiritual sensibility, Isabella found her own ways to worship God. She built a temple of brush in the woods, an African tradition she may have learned from her mother, and she bargained with God as if God were a familiar presence. It was this felt closeness with God that enabled her to hear what she believed to be the voice of God, calling her to walk away from slavery.

And so, in 1827—a year before New York’s abolition law was to take effect—Isabella, with her baby Sophia, left her master’s farm and walked to freedom, inspired by a vision of Jesus as her “soul-protecting fortress,” giving her the power to rise “above the battlements of fear.”

She took refuge with a nearby abolitionist family, the Van Wageners. The family bought her freedom for twenty dollars and helped her successfully sue for the return of her five-year-old-son Peter, who had been illegally sold into slavery in Alabama. In fact, the case was one of the first in American history in which a Black woman successfully challenged a white man in a U.S. court!

Isabella moved to New York City the next year, where she worked for a local minister. By the early 1830s, she participated in the religious revivals that were sweeping the state and soon was recognized for her gifts as a charismatic speaker.

In 1843, on the Day of Pentecost, she had a deep experience of the Spirit’s empowerment and felt called to sojourn west to preach the Truth, and thus was born Sojourner Truth, a woman called by God and re-named, signifying her call to be an itinerant preacher dedicated to the Truth and Justice of Jesus Christ.

Buoyed up by her growing reputation, she soon met abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Garrison’s anti-slavery organization encouraged Truth to give speeches about the evils of slavery. Though she never learned to read or write, in 1850 she dictated what would become her autobiography—*The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* – and it was this that brought her truly national recognition. She also met women’s rights activists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, as well as temperance advocates—both causes she quickly championed.

In 1851, Truth began a speaking tour that included a women’s rights conference in Akron, Ohio, where she extemporaneously delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, probably the single event for which is most remembered. In it, she challenged all sorts of prevailing notions of racial and gender inferiority, made all the more striking by the fact that she was herself nearly six feet tall!

The first version of the speech was published a month later by Marius Robinson, editor of the Ohio newspaper *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, who had attended the convention and recorded Truth's words himself:

Then that little man in Black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they're asking to do it, and the men better let them.

This version notably did *not* include the question “Ain't I a woman?” even once. That famous phrase would only appear in print 12 years later, as the refrain of a very, very Southern-tinged version of the speech. While in terms of ideas the earlier and later versions are largely similar, it is unlikely that Truth, as a native of New York whose first language was Dutch, would have spoken in such Southern idiom.

Even in abolitionist circles, some of Truth's opinions were considered radical. She sought political equality for *all* women and chastised the abolitionist community for failing to seek civil rights for Black *women* as well as men. In fact, she ultimately split with Frederick Douglass over this, who believed suffrage for formerly enslaved *men* should come *before* women's suffrage. *She* thought both should occur *simultaneously*, openly expressing concern that the movement would fizzle after achieving victories for Black men, leaving *women* – both black *and* white – without the right to vote.

During the 1850's, Truth settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, where three of her daughters lived. She continued speaking nationally and actively helped the enslaved to escape to freedom. When the Civil War started, Truth urged young black men to join the Union cause and organized supplies for them – her grandson even serving in the famous all-black regiment, the 54th Massachusetts.

Towards the end of the war, she was honored with an invitation to the White House and met and spoke with President Lincoln about her work and experiences. She also became involved with the Freedmen's Bureau, helping freed slaves find jobs and build new lives. And anticipating the days of Rosa Parks almost a century later, she lobbied vigorously against segregation on streetcars, and in the mid-1860s, when a streetcar conductor tried to violently block her from riding, she ensured his arrest and won her subsequent case.

A major project of Truth's later life was the movement to secure land grants from the federal government for formerly enslaved people. She argued that ownership of private property, and particularly land, would give African Americans self-sufficiency and free them from a kind of indentured servitude to wealthy landowners. Although she pursued this goal forcefully for many years, she was ultimately unable to sway Congress.

Until old age intervened, Truth continued to speak passionately on the subjects of women's rights, universal suffrage, and prison reform. She was also an outspoken opponent of capital punishment, testifying before the Michigan state legislature against the practice. She also championed prison reform in Michigan and across the country.

Nearly blind and deaf towards the end, she died at her home in Battle Creek on November 26, 1883. Her last words were “Be a follower of the Lord Jesus.”

As I considered her life and tried to listen deeply and take in its lessons in preparation for today, I was reminded of a hymn I have come to love ... one that for me brings together perfectly the

different strands of her incredibly active and useful life. It's a hymn which I first heard in my previous church through a Columbia seminary student, who introduced me to it as we prepared a service at which she preached. It's a hymn we sing in the online service today, "For Everyone Born."

Just take in the last stanza and let it flow in your heart:

*For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free,
and God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy,
compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice -
justice and joy!*

A place at the table. That's it. That's what Sojourner Truth, in her way, fought for. In a world in which conventional religion had almost always been used – and too often, still *is* used – as a means of raising fences to define who is "in" and who is "out," who is worthy and who isn't, Sojourner Truth recognized that the way of the *Spirit* is not raising fences but building *bigger tables!* There is room enough for everyone.

We know from our own history and our own times, how hard it can be simply to agree with God on that most basic tenet of Christian faith: that *everyone* is loved, that *everyone* is invited, whether they look like us or not, or they speak our own language or not, or whether we think they deserve it or not.

But here's something more: this inclusion of which the gospel speaks is not just a "spiritual" thing – that we're all equal in the sight of *God*, but human society and law and traditions, the hard realities of this world, are another matter ... that we may be equal in the eyes of God, but in this *world*, things just are the way they are ... That's just the way it is.

But that's exactly what Sojourner Truth couldn't accept. She understood that the good news of the gospel has *Justice* as its foundation, and has as its *goal* a life in *this* world in which God's will, God's love, God's compassion, God's vision is finally made real – on *earth*, as it already is in Heaven.

She understood that God's purpose for the pouring out of the Spirit is not just so people can feel free to raise their hands in worship, dance around, and speak in tongues, and make some frozen chosen Presbyterians uncomfortable. She understood that the Spirit was being poured out *for the shaking up and re-making of the world* ... that those who are last will be first, and the first, last ... that those who have been *without voice* may raise their voices in the power of God, and so

*your sons **and your daughters** shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
**Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.***

Sojourner Truth raised her voice in the power of the Spirit and stood fast to empower the weakest and most vulnerable members of society to rise and claim their own birthright as children of God and to take their honored place at a bigger, longer table, where all of us truly are one in Christ Jesus.

And so may we – we who have been blessed with advantages too many to count (and some perhaps too subtle to see) – listen to those voices, and seek to understand, and share in that struggle, and fight that good fight – to the glory of God! Amen.