

Tradition of truth: standing up and speaking out



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

In May 1851 the formerly enslaved woman, Isabella Baumfree, who chose the free name, Sojourner Truth, rose to speak at one of the first women's rights conventions, held in Akron, Ohio. As a person of deep faith, Sojourner spoke of human rights referencing the stories of her tradition.

Facing up to those looking down at her, an illiterate Black woman, she asked the predominantly white assembly what intellect has to do with people's rights. "If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?" No matter how educated a person is, how full their cup is, that doesn't mean their voice doesn't count.

"Wouldn't you be mean?," she asks, when others complain she's not smart enough to address injustice. She should keep her mouth shut and stay in her "God-given" place. The mean-spirited throw down the angriest arguments as obstacles to progress. When that meanness arises, intentionally or unintentionally, from religious faith, it takes a strong defender of truth to push on and push back.

Knowing full well how scriptures can be used as weapons to keep one group dominant over another, Sojourner showed that her intellect held more than a cup or a quart. As an African-American woman she was doubly judged by those who fiercely held to their power. Yet, she was one tenacious fighter with her own fierce sense of righteousness.

On the stage in Akron that day, she had heard men speak with condescension to keep women in their place, in the "sphere" God intended for them. When this tall, muscular, no-nonsense woman stood to respond, little did these men know what was coming.

Referring to one of the men who had just used his faith to argue against equality, Sojourner spoke with the confidence that comes from a life of suffering and struggle:

"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?" And she repeats: "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him!"

Undoubtedly there was laughing and scoffing at those words. But, she was right. That's the original story, told over and over for centuries by people proud to say "God became Man." Sojourner knows her Bible, the story of faith, and she's acutely aware of the convenient uses of scripture to hold one group or another back, hold them down. The powerful know how to hold their power, in the name of a God who looks just like them.

But there, on that day, a strong, self-assured woman, who sojourned far to speak truth to power, had everyone's attention:

"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!" Can we feel the intensity of these insightful words?

She was "schooling" the self-righteous with their own weapon, their own tool of oppression. The same book that taught slaves to obey both their masters and their Master (Ephesians 6:5-6), and tells wives to be subject to both their husbands and their Lord (Ephesians 5:22), also tells a larger story. It's a story often

overlooked by those who control the narrative, twisted to protect their power.

Sojourner dared to re-tell the biblical story: through a woman (Eve) the world is presented with sin. Through another woman (Mary), the world is presented with salvation. There you have it: God's whole plan for humanity depends on women.

When we consider the "culture wars" of today, the endless and endlessly divisive issues that pit person against person, group against group, party against party, more often than not the "viral vitriol" is fueled by ignorant ideologies — those who believe they exclusively have God on their side. To sustain their superiority they use God and scriptures to sustain their dominant position.

Those who have their Lord on their side can't help but "lord it over" others in their righteous cause. Yet they forget what their own book lays out before them. They neglect the voices of the Prophets and the threads of justice, concern for the powerless, and teachings of humility woven through their holy book, other holy books, and historic ethical traditions.

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of a woman's right to vote, we ought to remember the wise words of Sojourner that day in Ohio, when she stood and confronted the forces that would shout her down, waving Bibles in the air.

The banner of Truth rises higher.

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