

Why Do We Sing What We Sing?: Worship in Early America

*Ain't I A Woman?*

Mark 14:3-9

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In the 19th century, the rights of women caused intense debates within and outside the church. Giving voice to those debates were some of the most notable women in early 19th-century America. None of them provoked more admiration, criticism, and controversy than two notable preachers — one white, the other a former slave.

The first, Harriet Livermore, was the daughter of a congressman and the granddaughter of a senator, but after an emotional conversion experience, she renounced her privileged life in order to become a preacher. Reputed to be a gifted evangelist who was also a beautiful singer, Livermore became so popular that she was invited to preach in front of Congress four times between 1827 and 1844, each time to huge crowds. According to a Washington newspaper, more than 1,000 people assembled in the Hall of Representatives to hear her preach in 1827, and hundreds more gathered outside to catch a glimpse of her. Then-President John Quincy Adams had to sit on the steps leading up to her feet because he couldn't find a free chair.

Harriet Livermore was the best-known female preacher of her day, but she was part of a larger community of evangelical women, both white and black, who crisscrossed the country as itinerant preachers, despite being barred from most churches (including our own denomination) because of a misinterpretation of the Apostle Paul's admonition that women should keep silent in church.

Outside church walls, women also refused to have their voices silenced as they fought for the right to vote through the woman's suffrage movement. The title of my sermon comes from the second-most notable female preacher in early America. She delivered her impassioned sermon in one of the most memorable moments at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Here's an eyewitness account:

Several ministers attended the second day of the women's rights convention and were not shy in voicing their opinions of man's superiority over women. One claimed men had superior intellect. Another spoke of the manhood of Christ. And still another referred to the "sin" of our "first mother." Suddenly Sojourner Truth, a black woman, rose from her seat in the corner of the church. As she did, half a dozen women whispered to the convention's leader: "For God's sake, Mrs. Gage, don't let her speak." These women, along with many others, were afraid their cause would become mixed up with the Abolition movement.

Undaunted, Sojourner Truth walked to the podium and slowly took off her sunbonnet. Her 6-foot frame towered over the audience. She began to speak in her deep, resonant voice, "Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think between the Negroes in the south and the women in the north all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this talking about?" Sojourner pointed to one of the ministers, "That man over there says that women need to

be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. Ain't I a woman?"

Sojourner raised herself to full height: "Look at me, look at my arm." She bared her right arm and flexed her powerful muscles. "I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns and no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man when I could get it and bear the lash as well and ain't I a woman? I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery and when I cried out with a mother's grief none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

The women in the audience went wild with applause. Sojourner pointed to another minister: "He talks about this thing in his head. What's that they call it?"

"Intellect!" a woman shouted out.

"That's it, honey. What's intellect got to do with women's rights or black folks rights? If my cup only holds but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? That little man wearing black over 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?" she thundered again. "From God and a woman, man had nothing to do with him!" The entire church roared with deafening applause.

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women here together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right-side up again.

"And now that they are asking to do it and the men better let them. I'm obliged to you for hearing me. Now ole Sojourner hasn't got nothing more to say." She sat back down.

Sojourner Truth was at that meeting that night because for the first 28 years of her life she had lived in slavery. Her real name was Isabella. Like all those enslaved, Belle (as she was called) longed for freedom. Two years before she was to be legally set free, her master made her a proposition. He promised her that if she worked extra hard over the next year, he would set her free a year early. Believing in his word, Belle put in endless hours of grueling labor only to have her master renege on his promise. Furious, she escaped and found refuge in the home of a Quaker family who paid off the remainder of her time. Belle was so happy with this family that she adopted their last name, Van Wagenan.

Many years later, at the age of 46, Belle received a message from God during a time of deep prayer; a call to become God's instrument to sojourn the land and speak the truth of God's Word. And, so, Isabella Van Wagenan became Sojourner Truth. The simplicity of her language, the sincerity of her message, together with the courage of her convictions, made her a much sought-after preacher. As the debate over slavery intensified, Sojourner Truth was frequently harassed while speaking. On one such occasion, she was told the building in which she was to speak would be burned to the ground if she attempted to enter. Undaunted, she replied, "Then I shall speak to the ashes." Sojourner Truth's tongue of fire that proclaimed the dignity of all persons made her one of the most distinguished women in the 19th century.

That cry for human dignity, freedom, and equal rights rang out in assembly halls, on city streets and in churches all across our country. When we revisit this period of history it never ceases to astonish that people who were treated so inhumanely were able to sing with such faith: "I've got

peace like a river in my soul, I've got joy like a fountain in my soul, I've got love like an ocean in my soul." Or, sing in all humility: "Every time I feel the Spirit I will pray." Or, sing with such commitment: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." Singing spirituals, otherwise known as "sorrow songs," expressed their faith in our God who created them in God's image and likeness. They sang as an expression of their hope in our God who delivers people from their oppression; our God who walks alongside those who suffer; alongside those who speak out against injustice, and alongside those who work for justice. Singing their faith empowered those seeking the fullness of their human dignity as a child of God and singing their "sorrow songs" shaped, formed, and strengthened their communal identity.

Those whom the world dehumanized were and are able to sing with faith and hope in our Creator because they know and experience the reality of what Paul wrote, that in the kingdom of God, there is no Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, for we are all one in the redeemed creation Christ creates among us. In this morning's familiar Gospel lesson, we witness that reality of Jesus dismantling the barriers that continue to divide us. What the disciples thought to be an outlandish and indignant act by this foolish and wasteful unnamed woman, Jesus experienced as a profound act of love, attaching such great value to it and saying that wherever the gospel is preached she would be remembered. And, as we know, this was just one of many instances where Jesus dignified the humanity of someone whom the world treated as less than human.

Take a minute to think about who it is or who it was that has spoken dignity into your being. Who affirmed you in the fullness of your identity. Maybe it was with words or, as this woman did for Jesus, affirming the fullness of your identity with an extraordinary act of love. We can't thank God enough for those people who have helped us come to believe in our own self-worth in all our human creatureliness. We can be that person for others in simple and subtle ways, by truly seeing them for who they are, or being willing to understand their experience before we make assumptions and judgments about them or their lives — subtle, yet lasting, ways we can value the life of another. As followers of Jesus, we are called to not always be so subtle. He calls us to be bold and courageous witnesses to the reality of God's kingdom here on earth, to speak and act for those who still seek justice and equality as humans created in the image and likeness of their Creator — for we are all ONE in the redeemed creation Christ is creating among us!

