

Go Also the Second Mile

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18](#)

[Matthew 5:38-48](#)

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The African-American spirituals have a way of acknowledging sorrow and hardship, and at the same time they have a way of offering hope. Faith in God throughout one's lifetime and hope for liberation in the afterlife gave the slaves reason to live on, in spite of tremendous suffering.

This is Black History Month, a time when we acknowledge the contributions of African Americans. One of the major contributions has been to our church history. Today I'd like to talk about two women: Sojourner Truth and Dorothy Height who were Methodists. Both of these women championed the causes of African-American rights and women's rights, which is also to say human rights.

The idea of human rights comes from looking at what all people deserve simply because they are human. The problem is that some human rights have not been backed up by enforceable laws.

Some of our most ancient laws are God's commandments found in the Hebrew Bible. Today we heard a few of the commandments as they are listed in Leviticus: We must leave food in the field for the poor and the immigrant. We must not insult a deaf person or a blind person. We must not hold a grudge or show favoritism. We must not steal or be unjust. Now, not stealing, that is one of the Ten Commandments, but these other commandments actually go beyond the Ten. No one will arrest you if you don't leave food for the poor. No one will arrest you for being unkind in your language or favoring one person over another....These commandments go beyond enforceable laws. They are ethical standards that God has set because all human beings deserve to be treated well. That is what it means to have human rights. God's laws have always gone beyond the minimum; they've gone also the second mile.

The laws Jesus taught were also bound by fairness, and they were bound by love. Whereas the Hebrew Scriptures often talk about the rights of groups of people: immigrants, people with disabilities, or widows and children, in the Christian scriptures Jesus talks about individuals. If someone sues you, give your coat as well. If someone begs from you, give to the person. You are called to love not just your brothers and sisters; love even your enemies! Jesus always went the second mile.

There are levels of morality. Lawrence Kohlberg developed a theory of three basic levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality. Basically at the bottom of this ranking of morals—at the pre-conventional level—is everyone for themselves. At this level, people operate to avoid punishment or in order to achieve personal gain. At the conventional level, is the agreement to have laws at all, that we need them to govern

society. For the good of all, we have to accept rules. Then at the top of the ranking—at the post-conventional level—we have the kind of morality that evaluates laws and determines whether they are right. The highest level is one at which an individual may break laws for a higher good. At this level people care about the human rights of others, even above and beyond the law.

At the time our nation was founded, black people were not included in our laws because they were not counted as human. White Christians could read their bibles and say they were applying the Golden Rule to their neighbors: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and not even think about applying that rule to black people, not even think of them as neighbors.

The fight to include people of color in the laws of our land was a slow march on a stony road, as in James Weldon Johnson's hymn, "Stony the road we trod..." The heroes who marched had to walk a mile on the stony road, and then a second mile, sometimes breaking laws that were unjust...And today the fight goes on.

I attended a conference at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles last week. One of the exhibits, called "We the People," focused on the Civil Rights Era. It made a point of showing what led up to the 50s and 60s in America from 1565 on, and what has followed up to today, to show that civil rights are not a "done deal" that we can look back on. Brave leaders have trod a long stony road to make human rights more available to all. And the march goes on....

Sojourner Truth was one of the soldiers in the march for human rights. Her name was Isabella—just Isabella. She was a black slave born around 1797 near the town of Hurley, New York, along the Hudson River. Her parents were slaves of a Dutch-speaking family, so Dutch was the only language Isabella knew as a young child. Their owner held seven slaves who worked his land and his mill. When the master died, Isabella and the other six slaves became the property of the master's son, Charles. The slaves worked the land and worked in the hotel of their new master. They slept all together in one room in the cellar on straw. Isabella's parents had between 10 and 12 children, but all but Isabella and a younger child were auctioned off to other farms. Isabella was seven years old when her master, Charles, died. Her parents were freed, and Isabella was sold at auction, "with a lot of sheep," she remembers. Her price was \$100 (Mabee, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*, 3).

Isabella married a slave named Tom, probably in about 1816, but the law of New York did not recognize marriage among slaves as legal. There were laws, but the laws did not include everyone. Because slaves were not considered human, slave owners found it permissible to rape their female slaves. Isabella's next master, Mr. Dumont likely fathered some of her children. Isabella did housework for the family, and though the family had many books, she was not allowed to learn to read. She raised the white children of the family, even breast fed them, but was not permitted to spend time with her own children.

You may not have known that we had slavery in the North. The State of New York finally abolished slavery in 1824. Isabella and her children were then freed. But then one of

Isabella's son was illegally sold back into slavery at age five. When Isabella found this out, she took the matter to court. Now this was a woman who primarily spoke Dutch and couldn't read or write. She figured out what a grand jury was, and she marched up and filed her complaint and won back her son's freedom. And she didn't stop there. She went the extra mile and fought on to help other families.

Isabella changed her name to Sojourner—which means traveler—and Truth—you know what that means: a traveler for the truth. She felt she deserved to have both a first name and a last name, like everyone else. She began her travels in Boston, protesting that streetcars were segregated by race, 90 years before Rosa Parks sat down in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She travelled across the country and back, and having by then learned English, she preached everywhere about human rights. She marched all the way to the White House and met with President Abraham Lincoln. And though she never learned to read and write, she dictated her life story, and now we have it as one of many slave narratives revealing the truth of the inhuman experience of slavery. Sojourner Truth was a Methodist. She connected her attitudes about human rights to her faith in God.

Sojourner Truth gives us a narrative of 19th century slavery and emancipation from a Christian perspective. This is the tradition out of which our African American Spirituals come. But the fight wasn't over; others would have to pick up the march.

A hero of the 20th century, perhaps somewhat in the background because she was a woman, was Dorothy Height. Dorothy Height studied social work and became the executive director of the YWCA. She became the leading female voice of the 1960s civil rights movement. She stood with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the stage at the March on Washington in 1963. She served as president of the National Council of Negro Women for nearly 40 years. She was another Methodist. Her faith moved her to meet with Eleanor Roosevelt, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama, always working for human rights for all. This month the U.S. Postal Service issued a forever stamp in her honor, as you see on the cover of your bulletin. She died in 2010 at the age of 98.

Sojourner Truth and Dorothy Height thought black people and women should have the same rights as white men. Even if that wasn't the law of the land, they knew there was a higher law. The fight for human rights is not over. At the Museum of Tolerance, I met Dr. Terrence Roberts, who was one of the Little Rock Nine, the first black high school students to enter all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. The Supreme Court had made segregation of the schools illegal in 1954 with the case *Brown vs the Board of Education*. Dr. Roberts is an eloquent speaker. He told what it was like to be yelled at, spat upon, and beaten day after day. After one year, with voters defending segregation 3 to 1, the schools in Little Rock shut down, and Terrence Roberts moved with his family to Los Angeles. He studied social work at UCLA and then psychology, earning his PhD. Now he dedicates his life to what he says is "our national conversation," a conversation that we must be having about community social responsibility and tolerance.

This is a conversation that started in the Holy Bible, when God's laws and Jesus' teachings urged us all to "go also the second mile." The Museum of Tolerance defines tolerance as the

active pursuit of human dignity. We are not done yet. Martin Luther King asked the crowds at the Lincoln Memorial, "How long?" and everyone answered, "Not long." There was hope in that answer, and yet a determination to fight on for as long as it takes to bring dignity to all. How long? Not long.