JESUS’ CHALLENGE TO US ALL

As we passed through another Easter season this spring, we reflected on the example of perfect love, Agapé love, the love that allowed One to lay down His life for many. As we strive to emulate our Savior, achieving this kind of sacrificial love may seem unattainable. Yet Jesus’ entire life was a study in love, a love that we can attain in our own lives, one small act at a time.

The message of Christ is simple. Love everyone — those who persecute you, even those who seem the least lovable or those we feel don’t deserve to be loved. Why? Because Christ understood that our hearts are transformed when we embrace others, and that the experience of being loved opens our hearts to the capacity to show love. “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Loving those who seem the least lovable not only increases our empathy for humanity, but also creates empathy for the unlovable parts of ourselves.

Loving is a radical act, made up of seemingly insignificant decisions throughout the day. Do we take the time to allow someone to merge into the lane ahead of us? Do we respond to a slow cashier with patience rather than judgment? Then there are the larger things. When we hear about yet another earthquake in India, are we moved to act in some way or do we harden our hearts? Each time we choose to recognize and honor our connection with others, we become a living example of our faith.

Feminist theologian Ann Belford Ulanov wrote: “Any religion can be tested by its response to suffering and human destructiveness.” The depth of our faith becomes evident in our response to tragedy or crisis around us: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for Me” (Matt. 25:40). And while we all want to respond, in our hectic lives, it isn’t always easy.

Overwhelmed by the myriad details of life, we can easily suppress our emotions, and turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. But as we become fortified by the Spirit, we can acknowledge the call to action that Christianity is. By answering this call we are doing our part to help humanity move beyond isolation and fragmentation into a human chorus that praises the wonder and glory of God.

RELATIONALITY

Within the Christian tradition there is the concept of the mystical body of Christ. We are all part of one unity, we are all in relationship. We find this concept in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” God mandates us to remember we are all His children. As we open to this truth, the categories between us dissolve. The illusion of separation is replaced with an awareness of our connection, and the gains made by any one of us have a ripple effect.

Christ modeled this in that “…being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil. 2:6–7, emphasis added). Jesus set aside rank to walk among all people, including prostitutes and lepers: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Women are now gaining their voices after having been silenced throughout the ages. For this reason, women have a particularly salient message about the need to include all voices at the table. Thus, sharing the stories of remarkable women not only inspire us, but also help us recognize how our lives have been impacted by every action taken throughout time to increase social justice.
LIVING EXAMPLES OF FAITH IN ACTION

The following three women — Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, and Dorothy Day — are shining examples of faith in action, a level of love achieved only when Christ’s challenge is taken up.

Sojourner Truth worked tirelessly until her death in 1883 to free the slaves. Her life was an inspiration to many, including President Lincoln. Her life’s work helped build the foundation for future civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Martin Luther King Jr. Lucretia Mott, pastor, speaker and civil rights activist helped organize the American Anti-Slavery Society, sparked the first Women’s Rights convention, and was the first president of the American Equal Rights Association. Dorothy Day, adding to the infrastructure built by thousands of Catholic Sisters to support the poor and underserved, created Hospitality Houses. Her example helps the whole church increase its commitment to the voiceless.

These women exemplify the profound difference one person can make. They channeled their faith into action and made the work of others who followed them easier.

WE SHALL BE FREE! THE STORY OF

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was born a slave named Isabella Hardenberg. Her last name was the same as her master’s, because she was his property. For the first nine years of her life, Isabella was raised by her mother, who taught her about God. When Isabella turned nine, however, the somewhat protected life she’d enjoyed shattered on the auction block. With a few smacks of the gavel, Isabella was sold, never to see her family and business while their whaling husbands were gone for much of the year. According to Quaker beliefs, women were allowed the same freedom of speech and worship as men.

Though uneducated and illiterate, Isabella instinctively knew it was wrong for people to own other people. Remembering her mother’s teachings about faith, Isabella prayed to God for guidance. She received a vision of escaping in the early morning. When she asked God where she would go, the image of a house was revealed to her. In the pre-dawn light of a new day, with God in her heart and at her side, Isabella walked out of her master’s house, taking her first few steps into her new, free life.

Once free, Isabella cleaned houses to support herself. One day while scrubbing the floor, she realized: “I am no longer Isabella.” Rising to her full height, Isabella asked God for a new name. “The Lord [named me] ‘Sojourner,’ because I was to travel up an’ down the land, shovin’ the people their sins, an’ bein’ a sign unto them. Afterwards I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me ‘Truth,’ because I was to declare the truth to the people.”

It wasn’t enough that Sojourner had gained freedom for herself. Answering Jesus’ call and fulfilling her God-given name, she set out to free other slaves. Though she had no idea what she would say or do, Sojourner climbed onto the stage at her first anti-slavery meeting and opened her mouth, trusting that the words would come. “Children, who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black? Does it not cast a reproach on our Maker to despise a part of His children, because He has been pleased to give them a black skin?... Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other?”

When Sojourner first heard about women’s suffrage, she didn’t understand the cause. Caught up in the abolition of slavery, Sojourner didn’t realize that all women, black and white, were suffering the status of non-personhood. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how connected her fight against slavery was to suffrage.

“I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay,” noted Sojourner, who summed up the suffrage movement with these simple words: “We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much.”

Sojourner devoted her life to freeing her brothers and sisters. Seeing a kinship between herself and President Lincoln, she traveled to the White House. When he shook her hand, Sojourner confided: “I never heard of you before you were talked of for President.” Smiling, Lincoln replied: “Well, I heard of you, years and years before I ever thought of being President.”

Lucretia Mott:

INTEGRITY AND RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

“...the independence of the husband and the wife is equal, their dependence mutual, and their obligations reciprocal.”

Flowing out of her commitment to prayer and Quaker practices, Lucretia Mott believed that everyone had the opportunity and duty to be Christ’s eyes, ears, and hands here on earth. She lived these convictions in a very real way.

Born into a matriarchal society in 1793 Massachusetts, Lucretia’s early examples were those of strong women. Women had to manage family and business while their whaling husbands were gone for much of the year. According to Quaker beliefs, women were allowed the same freedom of speech and worship as men.

Lucretia’s later life as pastor, speaker, and civil rights activist grew out of these beginnings. She helped organize the American Anti-Slavery Society, sparked the first women’s rights convention, and was...
the first president of the American Equal Rights Association (which fought to secure equal rights for women and blacks in all areas of life.)

The Equal Rights Amendment was introduced to Congress in 1923 as the “Lucretia Mott Amendment.” The Amendment finally passed Congress in 1972, but lacked the necessary number of states for ratification. Despite an extension of time until June, 1982, proponents were still unable to achieve the necessary 38 state ratifications.

History remembers Mott as an abolitionist and as a leader of women’s rights. What is less well-known is her influence on the theology of the women’s movement. Though she left no writings, many of her actions were recorded by her listeners and supporters.

A survey of the major points in her sermons shows that she consistently wedded faith with action. Her inspired social activism was informed by clearly articulated theological insights, making her a precursor of contemporary feminist theologians.

Lucretia’s pursuit of justice was not simply a matter of equal rights. The liberation of slaves, of women from their degraded position, and of men and women from sectarian prejudice were compelling for Lucretia. Her message was that, “permitted to seek the Truth without fetters, human beings could perceive manifest duty and through Holy Obedience could become instruments in the realization of the Kingdom of God.”

The theological and ethical convictions behind her activism are also revealed in statements like this: “We need a church for humanity, a religion that shall reach the suffering and downtrodden; we need a Christianity that will lead us to put our souls in the souls’ stead of the oppressed….”

This was her battle-cry, a commitment to right relationship and integrity which allowed many who were previously silenced to find voice, and from which we still benefit today.

Dorothy Day:

“BRING US YOUR POOR, TIRED, AND HUDDLED MASSES...”

“...The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?”

Dorothy Day felt ashamed by her actions early in her adult life. Drawing on the strength of her faith enabled Dorothy to access a profound love. She channeled this resource into offering dignity to the least lovable people according to society’s standards. The more she opened her heart to the disenfranchised population that she served, the more she was able to forgive herself her own transgressions. Her compassion for herself grew in equal measure to her compassion for others.

Dorothy Day was anything but a saint. During the first twenty years of her life, she barely entered the inside of a church. Her early history included sexual affairs, an abortion, being abandoned by the father of her daughter, and raising her daughter alone. Though she was born to middle-class parents, she knew what it was like to live poor and feel lonely.

At first Dorothy channeled her radical justice work into the Socialist party. Yet she increasingly found herself drawn to the Catholic principles of embracing the poor. She described her life as “a succession of events that led me to Jesus’ feet, glimpses of Him that I received through many years which made me feel the vital need of Him and of religion.” Her friends were shocked and deeply dismayed when Dorothy began to attend the Catholic Church in her neighborhood.

When Dorothy met Peter Maurin, a former Catholic Brother, her faith was crystallized into action. They began by publishing The Catholic Worker, a newspaper featuring stories about nonviolence, economic and racial justice, and the certainty of Christ’s loving forgiveness. Soon readers were knocking on her door, asking how they could help her or be helped by her. The Catholic Worker, written on a scarred, Formica table, formalized a movement.

From its beginning, the Catholic Worker movement grew into a network of houses of hospitality offering refuge for people who were hungry, broken, homeless, or ill. Christian love was more than an idea. When a social worker asked how long Dorothy’s “clients” were allowed to stay in the hospitality house, she answered: “We let them stay forever. They live with us, they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. We pray for them after they are dead. Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Dorothy voluntarily chose poverty. It was her way of manifesting her love of God on earth. She wanted people to understand that loving was hard work. It might be easy to talk about love, but really loving others day after day requires a connection to the living God and a healthy measure of stamina!

When loving became difficult, Dorothy fortified herself with the assurance that suffering was also basic to her religious call. She believed that it was a privilege to share in the suffering of her Lord. Today more than 180 Catholic Worker communities still serve in the darkness, lighting the way of hospitality to the homeless, hungry, and exiled.

WE ARE ALL OF US IN THIS THING TOGETHER

God commands us to “Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy” (Psalm 82:3). The more we embrace God’s call to love, the more God’s face is revealed. By recognizing that each person on this planet is created in God’s image, we make life sacred again. When life is truly celebrated as sacred, we naturally move away from war and toward peaceful coexistence.

The process of building harmony involves amplification of every voice. God’s call to love and the work of connection also require us to be sensitive to the pain that occurs when we or others feel silenced. Dorothy Day shared the suffering of others, taking the downtrodden into her Hospitality House, living with them, raising her daughter among them, and doing all she could for them. Sojourner Truth empathized with the plight of her fellow slaves. Once she gained her...
There can be no real discussion of the eradication of oppression for African Americans without also admitting that one of the oppressors of African American women is the African American church itself.”
—REV. DR. WILLIAM H. CURTIS, FROM THE FOREWORD

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Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt is founder of The Sister Fund, a private women’s fund dedicated to the social, political, economic, and spiritual empowerment of women and girls. She is the author of Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance and is honored to be an inductee in the National Women’s Hall of Fame, in Seneca Falls, N.Y. Helen and her husband Harville Hendrix have six children and four wonderful grandchildren.

NOTES
3. This version of one of Sojourner Truth’s addresses is taken from an unidentified newspaper, June 12, 1863, reporting on a meeting held at the state Sabbath School Convention, held in Battle Creek, Michigan. Available on-line in the speeches menu of the Sojourner Truth Institute website, http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/Default.htm#RACE.
6. Quoted in Margaret Hope Bacon, A Holy Obedience and Human Liberation, p. 212.