

Hungry Now

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Preaching on:

Luke 6:17–26

As Christians observing Black History Month, I think it's important for us to celebrate the contributions of Black people not just to our secular society, but also to our faith. And to put the contributions of Black Christians and the Black Church in proper perspective, we've got to acknowledge that there have been broadly two versions of Christianity in American life. The first is slaveholder religion—a white supremacist religion that preached that God made White people to rule and Black people to be held in bondage to White people. It taught that slavery is not only a natural condition, but a God-ordained one (for Black people only, of course). And it claimed that Black people were not created in God's image and that Black people are less than human. After slavery ended, slaveholder religion adapted itself to

the changing times. Now, it blessed segregation, sanctified Jim Crow, and presided at lynchings and cross burnings across the country.

The Christian ancestors I admire come from the other broad category of Christianity in American life: the Christianity of those few White people who refused to accommodate or compromise with slaveholder religion or racism, and, more importantly, the Christianity of Black people in America who believed that our God is a God who chooses the slaves of the world over and against the pharaohs and the slavedrivers of the world. It was in the underground churches of the persecuted and oppressed that the light of Christ's gospel held back the darkness that had overcome so much of the rest of the Church.

One of the tenders of that light was Sojourner Truth. She was born into slavery as Isabella Baumfree in 1797 just a few miles up the Hudson in Rifton, NY. She was sold multiple times before she was 13 and suffered a great deal of abuse, separated from her parents, watching her own children sold in slavery. At 30 she escaped and, following a vision from God, she made her way to the house of a Quaker family who bought her from her master and freed her.

Eventually she renamed herself Sojourner Truth and she became an itinerant Christian preacher, abolitionist, and suffragist. She once told a gathering of abolitionists and clergymen at Harriet Beecher Stowe's house, "The Lord has made me a sign unto this nation, an' I go round a'testifyin' an' showin' on 'em their sins agin my people." Truth couldn't read so she didn't write down her speeches and sermons, but some were written down by others who heard them. The most famous of them was given at a Women's Rights Convention in 1851. Truth said:

"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. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. 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 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?"

Appearances, Truth is telling us, can be deceiving. If you believe women are weak because of their social position, then you do not understand strength the way God sees strength; you do not understand power the way Jesus preaches power.

A few years back there was a Frida Kahlo exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum called "Appearances Can Be Deceiving." When you walked into the exhibit you were overwhelmed with color and strength. The opening rooms of the exhibit were filled with the paintings and photographs of Frida Kahlo the cultural icon—the impassive, beautiful face; the gorgeous, brightly colored dresses; the striking eyebrow, the passionate marriage to Diego Rivera.

One of the first items on display was a photo of Kahlo at 19. She's staring right into the camera with such cool, poised confidence you would never know that just a few months before she had been in a horrible trolley accident that had almost killed her and left her with injuries and pain and complications that would plague her for the rest of her relatively short life. She's carefully posed in the portrait, sitting on a chair in a way that hides her injuries—both from the accident and from a bout with childhood polio. Looking at the photograph, without knowing the context, you would never guess *that pain* that was being masked by it.

But then in the final room of the exhibit, you finally got to see all the context. Here were Kahlo's disability and suffering—her prosthetic leg is on display, the broken columns she frequently painted as a depiction of her spine were here, there were drawings of her lost fetus, and, standing all in a row, the medical plaster corsets that she suffered inside of for months at a time.

Halfway through this final room, you came to a drawing of Kahlo's that is like a self-portrait x-ray. In it you see right through her beautiful indigenous dress to her naked, broken body beneath it—her injured leg, her tortured back, her empty womb. Written beneath the drawing are the words, "Appearances Can Be Deceiving."

The illusion is peeled back, and we're confronted with the truth that Kahlo's greatest art slams head on into the greatest sufferings of her life—her injuries, her miscarriage, and her difficult relationship with her husband. In fact, I think that all of Kahlo's art and all of her presentation of herself can be traced back ultimately to her struggles.

So, just like with Sojourner Truth, it's not just Kahlo's physical appearance that could be—at times—deceiving. We see in this final room that we have also been deceived about the source of her power. Was Frida's Kahlo's art inspired by privilege and good fortune? Was Sojourner Truth's source of power a God who blesses the best of us with privilege and comfort? Where is the blessing and where is the woe in these women's lives? Where does their power and where does our power come from?

In Advent, two months back, Luke told us that after Mary conceived Jesus, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and she sings. She sings that God throws down the powerful from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry, and sends the rich away empty. She does not sing that God *will* do this, but that God *has* done this. Don't be deceived! Mary releases a great energy into Luke's gospel, right at the beginning, like tipping a big stone over the edge of a hill.

That stone rolls right into Epiphany when, three weeks ago, in Jesus' very first act of public ministry, before he does anything else, he goes to Nazareth and reads from the Isaiah scroll: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then Jesus tells the gathered crowd, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled!" Do not be deceived! Today! Not tomorrow. Right now. And it feels like that big stone Mary pushed is now bouncing and leaping and cracking down the mountain.

And today, immediately after choosing the twelve disciples, Jesus also comes down a mountainside to a level place and gives them all—disciples and people—their first lesson. It is simple, concise, clear, and concrete: You who are now poor, hungry, weeping, and despised are blessed because the Kingdom of God is yours. And you who are rich, filled, laughing, and respected are now so full that you are likely to remain empty.

We hear from Mary that God is doing great things for the poor and casting down the powerful. We hear from Jesus that God has sent him to bring good news of liberation to the poor and imprisoned. And now we hear from Jesus that our whole assumption, the perspective of seeing the poor as low and the rich as great, is the great deception. We've gone past the tipping point and suddenly that stone bounding down the mountain is bounding back up the mountain again! and the world we know is upside down.

And those of us who have been praying for God's blessing begin to wonder if God's idea of a blessing and our idea of a blessing are at all compatible. And those of us who desire to be powerful and effective and good in the world are forced to ask ourselves what God's power, and justice, and goodness manifest in the world will really look like. Will it be a vision that well-off, well-fed, happy, and respectable folks—innocents who know nothing of the world's true suffering—can pull off?

Where does our power come from? Sojourner Truth, a black woman born into slavery believed that her power came from the power of Jesus in everything—even within her, giving her the perspective to illustrate with her life that what the world calls weakness, God calls strength; what the world calls inferior, what the world enslaves, what the world puts chains on, that is the social position from which God sees the world, from which God moves and acts and judges. Frida Kahlo's power came from artistic expression that defied but never denied her suffering. She also never deified her suffering. She didn't pursue it or celebrate it, she confronted it, she harnessed it, she transformed the lead into gold. Jesus says it so matter-of-factly that it's dumbfounding. You can only be a disciple of my Way if you recognize that in a world of haves and have-nots, God is not located in privilege or good fortune, but in the lives of those who hunger.

Beloved, do not be deceived. If you want to respond to a suffering world, you cannot do it, ultimately, from the places that are well-off, well-fed, happy, and respected. You need to find the place within you that is suffering, has suffered. Find your hunger, find your disgrace, find your failure, and there you will find God waiting to respond not just to you, but to a whole world in desperate need of grace. Don't listen to the satisfied ones who say that suffering is a curse from God. Listen instead to God, who promises: We will not be defeated by this, together we will turn it upside down until it is a blessing.