

September 25, 2016

UMW Sunday

SOJOURNER TRUTH

Galatians 3:27-29

I want to tell the story of a famous Methodist woman.

Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh bought James and Elizabeth Baumfree from slave traders and kept their family at his estate in a big hilly area called by the Dutch name [Swartekill](#) (just north of present-day [Rifton](#)), in the town of [Esopus, New York](#), 95 miles north of New York City.^[3] Charles Hardenbergh inherited his father's estate and kept the slaves as a part of that estate's property. James and Elizabeth had 12 children, one of whom was named Isabella...born in 1797. She died November 26, 1883.

When Charles Hardenbergh died in 1806, nine-year-old Belle was sold at an auction with a flock of sheep for \$100 to John Neely, near [Kingston, New York](#). Until that time, Belle spoke only Dutch. She later described Neely as cruel and harsh, relating how he beat her daily and once even with a bundle of rods. Neely sold her in 1808, for \$105, to Martinus Schryver of [Port Ewen](#), a tavern keeper, who owned her for eighteen months. Schryver sold her in 1810 to John Dumont of [West Park, New York](#), who was kindly disposed toward her.

The State of New York had begun, in 1799, to legislate the abolition of slavery, although the process of emancipating people who were enslaved in New York was not complete until July 4, 1827. Her owner had promised to grant Belle her freedom a year before the state emancipation, "if she would do well and be faithful." However, he changed his mind, claiming a hand injury had made her less productive. She was infuriated but continued working, spinning 100 pounds of wool, to satisfy her sense of obligation to him.

Late in 1826, Belle escaped to freedom with her infant daughter, Sophia. She had to leave her other children behind because they were not legally freed in the emancipation order until they had served as bound servants into their twenties.^[4] She later said "I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right."^[5]

She found her way to the home of Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen, who took her and her baby in. Isaac offered to buy her services for the remainder of the year (until the state's emancipation took effect), which her last owner accepted for \$20. She lived there until the New York State Emancipation Act was approved a year later.

Belle learned that her son Peter, then five years old, had been sold illegally by her last owner to an owner in [Alabama](#). With the help of the Van Wagenens, she took the issue to court and in 1828, after months of legal proceedings, she got back her son, who had been abused by those who were

enslaving him.^[4] Belle Baimfree became one of the first black women to go to court against a white man and win the case.^{[9][10]}

Belle had a life-changing religious experience during her stay with the Van Wagenens, and became a devout Christian. In 1829 she moved with her son Peter to New York City, where she worked as a housekeeper for [Elijah Pierson](#), a Christian Evangelist. While in New York, she befriended [Mary Simpson](#), a grocer on John Street who claimed she had once been a slave of George Washington. They shared an interest in charity for the poor and became intimate friends. In 1832, she met [Robert Matthews](#), also known as Prophet Matthias, and went to work for him as a housekeeper at the [Matthias Kingdom communal colony](#).^[4]

1843 was a turning point for Belle. She became a [Methodist](#), and on June 1, she changed her name to *Sojourner Truth*. She told friends: "The Spirit calls me, and I must go," and she left to make her way traveling and preaching about the abolition of slavery. And, she adopted for herself the passage in John 8:31-32 – "*If you continue in My Word, you will know the Truth and the Truth will make you free.*" At that time, Truth began attending [Millerite](#) Adventist campmeetings. However, that did not last since Jesus failed to appear in 1843 and then again in 1844. Like many others [disappointed](#), Truth distanced herself from her Millerite friends for a while. She was a Methodist.

In 1844, she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in [Northampton, Massachusetts](#). Founded by abolitionists, the organization supported [women's rights](#) and [religious tolerance](#) as well as [pacifism](#). There were, in its four-and-a-half year history a total of 240 members though no more than 120 at any one time. They lived on 470 acres, raising livestock, running a [sawmill](#), a [gristmill](#), and a silk factory. While there, Truth met [William Lloyd Garrison](#), [Frederick Douglass](#), and [David Ruggles](#). In 1846, the group disbanded, unable to support itself. In 1845, she joined the household of [George Benson](#), the brother-in-law of William Lloyd Garrison.

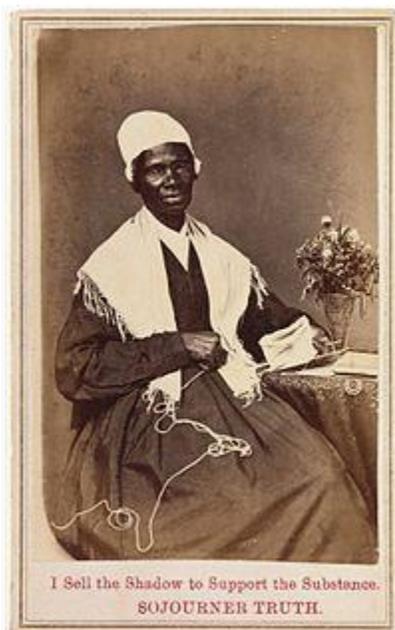
Truth started dictating her memoirs to her friend Olive Gilbert, and in 1850 William Lloyd Garrison privately published her book, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*.^[6] That same year, she purchased a home in what would become the village of Florence in Northampton for \$300, and spoke at the first [National Women's Rights Convention](#) in Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1854, with proceeds from sales of the Narrative and cartes-de-visite entitled "I sell the shadow to support the substance," she paid off the mortgage held by her friend from the Community, Samuel L. Hill.

In 1851, Truth joined [George Thompson](#), an abolitionist and speaker, on a lecture tour through central and western New York State. In May, she attended the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in [Akron, Ohio](#), where she delivered her famous extemporaneous speech on women's rights, later known as "[Ain't I a Woman](#)." Her speech demanded equal human rights for both, all women and all

blacks. The convention was organized by [Hannah Tracy](#) and [Frances Dana Barker Gage](#), who both were present when Truth spoke.

Over the next 10 years, Truth spoke before dozens, perhaps hundreds, of audiences. In 1858, someone interrupted a speech and accused her of being a man; Her 6-foot-tall stature made some wonder. But, Truth opened her blouse and erased all doubt.

On September 3, 1857, she sold all her possessions, new and old, to Daniel Ives and moved to [Battle Creek, Michigan](#) where she rejoined former members of the Millerite Movement who had formed the [Seventh-day Adventist Church](#). Antislavery movements had begun early in Michigan and Ohio. Here, she also joined the nucleus of the Michigan abolitionists, the Progressive Friends, some who she had already met at national conventions. According to the 1860 [census](#), her household in Harmonia included her daughter, Elizabeth Banks (age 35), and her grandsons James Caldwell (age 16) and Sammy Banks (age 8).^[4]



(Truth's [carte de visite](#), which she sold to raise money (see inscription).

During the [Civil War](#), Truth helped recruit black troops for the [Union Army](#). Her grandson, James Caldwell, enlisted in the [54th Massachusetts Regiment](#). In 1864, Truth was employed by the National Freedman's Relief Association in Washington, D.C., where she worked diligently to improve conditions for African-Americans. In October of that year, she met [President Abraham Lincoln](#).^[4] In 1865, while working at the [Freedman's Hospital](#) in Washington, Truth rode in the streetcars to help force their [desegregation](#).^[4]

Truth is credited with writing a song, "[The Valiant Soldiers](#)", for the [1st Michigan Colored Regiment](#); it was said to be composed during the war and sung by her in Detroit and Washington, D.C. It is sung to the tune of "[John Brown's Body](#)" or "[The Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)".

In 1867, Truth moved from Harmonia to Battle Creek. In 1868, she traveled to western New York and visited with [Amy Post](#), and continued traveling all over the [East Coast](#). At a speaking engagement in [Florence, Massachusetts](#), after she had just returned from a very tiring trip, when Truth was called upon to speak she stood up and said "Children, I have come here like the rest of you, to hear what I have to say."

In 1870, Truth tried to secure [land grants](#) from the [federal government](#) to former enslaved people, a project she pursued for seven years without success. While in Washington, D.C., she had a meeting with President [Ulysses S. Grant](#) in the [White House](#). In 1872, she returned to Battle Creek and tried to vote in the presidential election, but was turned away at the polling place.

Truth spoke about abolition, women's rights, prison reform, and preached to the Michigan Legislature against capital punishment. Not everyone welcomed her preaching and lectures, but she had many friends and staunch support among many influential people at the time, including [Amy Post](#), [Parker Pillsbury](#), [Frances Gage](#), [Wendell Phillips](#), [William Lloyd Garrison](#), [Laura Smith Haviland](#), [Lucretia Mott](#), [Ellen G. White](#), and [Susan B. Anthony](#).

Now consider, not just the quality of her character, and her triumph over her trials, but the vision of Paul. Everyone Baptized into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ. We should not see race or ethnicity, social status or gender... "*All are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28) We should never look upon another person as anything other than another soul for whom Jesus has died. "*There is no longer Jew nor Greek; there is no longer slave nor free; there is no longer male nor female!*" We need to rise to this vision and tell it to others. We need to see beyond what makes us different from a worldly point of view and gain the heavenly perspective. We need to know this truth, and it will make us free. God help us all.