

**St. Mary's Episcopal Church**  
**Message by Rev. Michael Burke**

**July 24, 2022**  
**Luke 11:1-13**



Good morning.

This past Wednesday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, was the Feast Day of four strong women who were prophets in their own day. In the Episcopal Church calendar, we remember and recognize people of faith through whose lives we see the work of God.

Although we sometimes refer to “Saints Days,” in the Episcopal Church we think of saints somewhat differently than in some traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church. A “saint” in our tradition is not the title of someone who has proven miracle ascribed to their name, and they weren’t “perfect people”, either in their own times or even in our remembrances of them. They were flawed, often broken human beings, imperfect in so many ways. What we celebrate about their lives is the ways in which the power of God, the Holy Spirit worked through their own particularity, through their own imperfection of mind, or temperament, to further the work of the God or the Gospel in the world.

This past week four women shared our attention: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Ross Tubman. All four were women of deep Christian faith, whose understandings of the Gospel impelled them to do the prophetic work they each did.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a devout Presbyterian, whose understandings of the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination and human depravity led her into a deep dark depression. She was led out of that depression by the Holy Spirit, who called Elizabeth to throw herself into a life dedicated to righting the wrongs perpetuated against women, in the name of God. She organized the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Fall, NY, July 19-20<sup>th</sup>, 1848 (168 years ago this weekend), which set the agenda for the next fifty years. At her home church, Trinity Episcopal in Seneca Falls, NY, and throughout New York and New England, she preached hundreds of sermons about scripture, women, and social justice. Elizabeth was deeply concerned about the ways in which certain bible passages were interpreted to enforce subordination of women, and believed fervently that those biblical interpretations were in error. In 1881, after the Revised Version of the Bible was published by a committee of biblical scholars which included no women, Elizabeth convened a group of women Bible scholars, and, using the original Greek she had learned as a child, retranslated the Bible with new commentary from women. I still have a

copy of the 1989 version of that Bible in my office. Its publication was so controversial, that after its publication, Elizabeth was marginalized even within the suffragette movement.<sup>1</sup>

A fellow parishioner at Trinity Episcopal was Amelia Bloomer, also born into a Presbyterian family. She took to wearing a form of Turkish trousers, which came later to be called “Bloomers,” and was harshly denounced from the pulpit by clergy who cited the admonition of Moses that “women should not dress like men.” Amelia’s response was to push back hard, and she too began preaching and teaching publically about responsible Biblical interpretation, and noted that if male clergy cared at all about what Moses said about clothing, they would all wear fringes and blue ribbons on their own garments.<sup>2</sup> She was one of the first widespread voices to suggest that the Church had historically misunderstood and misused passages from the writings of St. Paul, and sought to correct those messages.



Isabella Sojourner Truth was the next-youngest child born to James and Elizabeth, slaves “owned” by a wealthy Dutch couple in New York. For the first twenty eight years of her life, she was a household slave, sold from family to family. With the help of Quaker friends, she fled to Philadelphia, where she was one of the founders of Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church. Mother Zion A.M.E. Church was formed when members of St. George’s Church refused to allow Africa American members to worship alongside them. And so she became a street evangelist, preaching to poor women, and setting up one of the nation’s first women’s shelters. When asked “what is your name, she famously responded, “My name is Sojourner.” When asked her last name, she thought of all of her master’s names that she had carried throughout her life. Then the thought came, “the only master I have now is God, and his name is Truth.”<sup>3</sup> She followed the popular white religious revival meetings from town to town, and preached out of the Old Testament book of Exodus, calling people to heed God’s call to free the slaves. Her most famous speech, “Aint I a Woman,” was a direct response to clergy who preached that God created women to be subservient and blacks to be slaves.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Woman%27s\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Woman%27s_Bible)

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Men, Holy Women*, 2000, Church Publishing Inc., p 474.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 475.



And finally, Harriet Ross Tubman was a fourth woman of faith, and was born into slavery the sixth of eleven children. Her parents lived in daily fear that their children would be taken from them, separated and sold off. As a child, she endured severe beatings, but grew up strong and defiant. Like Sojourner, she too found her grounding in Scripture in the great Exodus narrative. She prayed that God would send a Moses to free her people. After escaping slavery into Canada at the age of 24, she organized and led 19 trips back across the border and down into Maryland, freeing and leading over 300 people to freedom back in Canada. She spoke of being guided by God through a series of dreams, and claimed that God had called her in the night to become the new Moses she had long prayed for. When the civil war began, she quickly joined the Union Army, serving as a nurse caring for both Union and Confederate soldiers. She was then recruited as a spy and a scout, and led 300 black Union soldiers on a daring and dangerous raid that freed over 750 slaves. That action made her the first documented American woman to ever lead U.S. troops into combat. After the war, she settled in New York and opened homes for orphans and the elderly, and founded schools for young black children. Along with her companions, Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she founded numerous organizations dedicated to addressing issues racial and gender inequality in education and employment.

Through this all, these four women of faith struggled to preach the Holy Gospel, to correct the misuses of Holy Scripture, and so to reform both church and society. They found in their faith the bedrock of their belief that each and every person is a beloved child of God, that all people are equal in the eyes of God, and that the Church is called to welcome all. The Gospel was not simply an *aid* to reform both church and society, an *aid* to their cause, it was the foundation of it.

And yet, it was the misuse of their faith by the popular preachers of their day that was their greatest obstacle and opposition. The boldness and immediacy of their message made even somewhat sympathetic church-goers nervous and quick to distance themselves. “Couldn’t they tone it down a bit?” the good people asked...

And yet they exemplified the character of “the petitioner” in the story in Luke’s Gospel today:

*“And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”*

*"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11:5-10)*

In closing, I leave you this thought, this question to ponder in your own heart and in your own life:

Where is the Holy Spirit coming to us, even now, in voices and persons and movements and words that disturb us, unsettle us, and make us want to turn away?

In the comfort of our own distractions and slumber, where in the world is the Holy Spirit raising up prophets to annoy us into listening, to bang at the doors of our hearts and minds until, exasperated and exhausted by their persistence, we must get up and answer?

**We'll leave it right there this morning...**

## Pearls

*(for women aware in male institutions)*

You are pearls.  
You began  
as irritants.

The ocean pushed  
your small, nearly  
invisible  
rough body  
through an undetected  
crack in the shell.

You got inside.

Happy to have a home  
at last  
you grew close  
to the host,  
nuzzling up  
to the larger body.

You became  
a subject  
for diagnosis:  
invader, tumor.

Perhaps your parents  
were the true invaders  
and you were born  
in the shell—  
no difference—  
called an outsider  
still.

You were a representative  
of the whole  
outside world,  
a grain of sand,  
particle of the Universe,  
part of Earth.

You were a *growth*.

*And you did not go away.*

In time  
you grew  
so large,  
an internal  
luminescence,  
that the shell  
could contain  
neither you nor itself,  
and because of you  
the shell Opened itself  
to the world.

Then your beauty  
was seen  
and prized,  
your variety valued:  
precious, precious,  
a hard bubble of light:  
silver, white, ivory,  
or baroque.

If you are a specially  
irregular and rough  
pearl, named baroque  
(for broke),  
then you reveal  
in your own  
amazed/amazing  
body of light  
all the colors  
of the Universe.



By *Alla Renée Bozarth*

*Alla Renee Bozarth was one of the first eleven women ordained to the priesthood in The Episcopal Church, on July 29, 1974.<sup>4</sup>*

*(That is 126 years after Elizabeth's first Women's Right Convention, and 42 years ago next week)*

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia\\_Eleven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia_Eleven)

