



The National Woman Suffrage Association, led by its president Matilda Joslyn Gage, at its Eighth Annual Convention in Washington, DC, 1876.

Freed and Inspired

BY JO ANN BURRELL

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm . . .
—Galatians 5:1a

The USA Mission Experience 2019 to the Finger Lakes Region of New York was an exhilarating experience. Women representing 13 synods participated in the trip and explored the theme “Standing on the Shoulders of Empowered Women,” a theme inspired by Galatians 5:1a.

The book of Galatians shows us the early Christian church—which increasingly included Gentiles—struggling to understand Jesus’ message, their place in the world and their relationship to Jews and Jewish law. Like those early Christians, we’re all still working out what Jesus’ message means for our daily lives and how we relate to one another!

Freedom in Christ

When Paul declares “For freedom Christ has set us free,” he presents a new understanding of what it means to be a person of faith. Paul stresses that we have been set free from sin, and that we should live in the fullness of that freedom. Several verses later, Paul says “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:13–14).

In Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, we encounter more than a lesson that God loves us alone. We hear that we are called to respond to God’s love with our own radical love and service. We are called to love others.

Throughout our trip, love of others was demonstrated and evidenced by the people who hosted us. Three presbyteries hosted the delegation, 18 churches provided meals and more than 40 volunteers welcomed participants to the region. The hospitality of PW groups and PC(USA) churches felt boundless.

Love of others was also a thread that wove together the stories of the suffragists, abolitionists and advocates from the area. It was inspiring to visit the Finger Lakes where new understandings of what it means to be a citizen took shape and gained popularity. Movements established or popularized in the Finger Lakes area—women’s rights, equal rights, human rights—led to brighter futures for many.

Inspired to Act

We must remember that living with inequality and injustice is inconsistent with God’s hope and plan for us, made visible through Jesus Christ. As Christians, we are called to step up, speak out and take action. We must stand firm.

Visiting the Finger Lakes, we learned about individuals and groups who stepped up, spoke out and took action when they saw injustice. For some advocates, it was their faith—their reading of scripture and interpretation of Jesus’ message—that inspired them to act. They wanted to share God’s love with all people. Others, including some who were agnostic or atheist, were motivated to advocacy because they could not abide people being treated as “less than” because of their gender or race.

Regardless of activists’ motivations, the Finger Lakes region has a tradition of bold activism. We were reacquainted with stories of well-known leaders, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and



Left to right: Matilda Joslyn Gage; the first International Council of Women in 1888, which included Matilda Joslyn Gage (front row, second from right); Mary Ann M'Clintock

Frederick Douglass, but also learned about lesser-known individuals who pushed the United States toward being more free and equal.

Empowered Individuals

Matilda Joslyn Gage was a suffragist and abolitionist from Fayetteville, New York. Along with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda was an active leader in the National Women's Suffrage Association. She marched, led rallies, wrote and spoke in favor of women's suffrages and rights. She risked a prison sentence and fine by offering her home as a station on the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves. At a time when many European Americans dismissed Native people, she voiced admiration for Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) society and people, shaping her social justice work around the egalitarianism she saw in their communities.

Matilda rejected the movements of the late 1800s that pushed for an amendment declaring the United States an exclusively Christian nation. Her resistance to the proposed amendment was at least partially rooted in her discomfort with the patriarchy of the Christian church. While her abolition and suffrage work was not inspired by a traditional faith in God, she was a fierce advocate for justice and equality. She stood her ground for her convictions.

Mary Ann M'Clintock was a Quaker woman who adamantly and

very publicly opposed slavery. She and her husband, Thomas, founded the Free Produce Society that promoted boycotting all goods manufactured with child and/or slave labor. Their family store carried only merchandise that was made without the use of slave labor. They would not sell products made of cotton because cotton was cultivated by slave labor. They sold woolen products, knowing the goods were created by paid workers.

Mary Ann hosted meetings in her home, and the Declaration of Sentiments was reportedly drafted there. The Declaration of Sentiments, modeled after the Declaration of Independence, made the then-shocking claim that "all men and women are created equal." The lessons Mary Ann M'Clintock, her family, and the Quakers of New York provided on how to change society through public action are reflected in today's rallies, demonstrations and social activism. Mary Ann stood firm in her belief in God and her love of Jesus Christ. She drew from this spiritual foundation when she "stood firm" for freedom and justice for all.

John W. Jones was born into slavery in Leesburg, Virginia. When his owner became too old to care for her slaves, John fled to Elmira, New York—a 300-mile journey on the Underground Railroad. After settling in Elmira, John became an active member of and sexton for First Baptist Church in Elmira.

He worked, pursued an education and saved money that allowed him to buy a home. John became a station master on the Underground Railroad, and more than 800 people came through his station, escaping slavery to settle in St. Catherine, Ontario. He housed many fugitive slaves in his home or found housing for them in and around Elmira. None of the 800 were ever returned South for bondage.

John was instrumental in the proper burial of 2,970 Confederate soldiers from Elmira Prison Camp. As a Christian, proper burials were very important to John—so important that he would ensure this dignity for even soldiers who were trying to maintain the institution of slavery. He buried the men with care and detailed records that led Woodlawn Cemetery to be recognized as a National Historic Site. John W. Jones lived out his deep faith in Jesus; he was resolved that no one should live in bondage.

Ensuring Freedoms

The USA Mission Experience showed us injustices, unkindness and suffering in our country's past, and still in our present. We also saw the impact of fortitude, determination, persistence, strength and faith. We saw the ways that we, inspired by God's grace, can move our country toward a society that protects the freedom and rights of all people.

For example, abolitionists questioned society's assumptions about what



John W. Jones Museum

John W. Jones and the museum that honors his work of securing freedom for enslaved people and dignity in death for soldiers

rights black slaves (and even free black people) should have. Thanks to their vision and advocacy, in 1865, the 13th amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery. However, illegal, unsanctioned slavery—human trafficking—still exists in our country. And the 13th amendment prohibits slavery “except as punishment for crime.” Today, we question incarceration policies that disproportionately impact people of color, and labor policies that prioritize low-cost goods over fair working conditions.

Our trip equipped our women with an understanding of the region’s history and culture, and the ministries of the churches in the area. We were introduced to the challenges faced by people in the Finger Lakes—immigration policies that are hard on asylum seekers, injustices suffered by farm workers, domestic violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and more. This trip called us to consider how we will embody God’s love for us and pursue wholeness for our neighbors.

We stand on the shoulders of our foremothers and forefathers. We rejoice that we are God’s people, strengthened by God’s grace, who can speak up and take action to work for freedom for all of God’s people.

Prayer

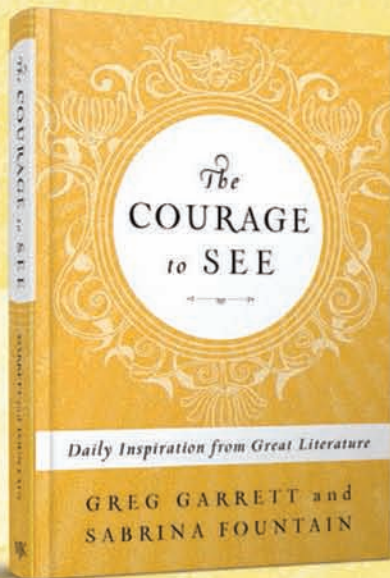
Gracious and loving God, thank you for your grace. Thank you for the people who came before us who stood firm in their beliefs. May we share your grace and love with all of your people. May we rejoice in anticipation of the grace you bestow upon us daily. Amen. 🍎

Questions

1. Reading Galatians 5:1a, how do you understand freedom?
2. How would you define personal freedom in our country today?
3. Where do you see a lack of freedom, where God’s love could be shared?

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