

“If I only touch His clothes, I will be healed”: A reading of Mark 5 v 21-34 by women who seek to name and reclaim their place in society and in the ministry of Jesus. A cry to God of life

By Fundiswa Amanda Kobo

Introduction

This paper explores the theme of both the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly 2013: “*God of life, lead us to justice and peace*”. It partially looks at the first part ‘God of life’ and employs one of the important sections touched upon during GETI ‘contextual theologies’¹. Thereby, exploring the possible contours of ‘contextual’ theologies by engaging them with each other as agents of ‘transformation.’² It is carried in the context of, Womanist³, and Theology of Liberation thereby setting the framework from within which women and in particular Black African Women begin to understand theology as liberation in the South African context⁴. It asserts that the struggle for women to challenge the patriarchal culture of subordination is still pertinent for our context today. “Patriarchy needs debunking but cannot be debunked in a heated battle”.⁵ The text of Mark 5 v 21- 34, with emphasis on the conversation the woman held from within herself “*If I only touch His clothes, I will be healed*”⁶ sets the premise of the paper. It is interpreted through the application of liberation hermeneutics and a hermeneutic of suspicion. As cited in Sibeko & Haddad

¹ Minjung, Black, Feminist, Womanist, Dalit, and Liberation: Theologies that have emerged out of particular historical realities to which the liberative aspects of the Christian message are addressed. For more on contextual theology read Bevans S. (1992) Models of Contextual Theology. Orbis, Maryknoll, NY

² Nadar, S. 2003, “Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Natal

³ At its core, womanism is a social change perspective based upon the everyday problems and experiences of black women and other women of colour, but more broadly seeks methods to eradicate inequalities not for just for black women, but for all people. <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Womanism>. Date visited 23 January 2014

⁴ South Africa has a long history of colonialisation and apartheid regime which brought a lot of oppression and exclusion on the basis of class, gender and race. The system of apartheid guaranteed that political, economic, and cultural power was controlled by the white minority. Social deprivation was heightened even further by the policy of separate development resulting in the forced removal of millions of people from their homes and a restrictive urbanization policy directed towards African people, implemented through pass laws and influx control measures. (Sibeko and Haddad “Reading the Bible”, p84)

⁵ WCRC-WCC Gender Training Manual on Positive Masculinities (Ecumenical Visions p 395)

⁶ Mark 5 v 28

(1997:83) “Liberation theologians have long argued that the key question in theology and biblical studies is who one's dialogue partners are in the doing of theology and in the reading of the Bible. In other words, who are our primary interlocutors?⁷ This paper takes cue from that argument, by using women and particularly women from a South African context⁸ in interpreting this text. It also sets the framework from within which women begin to name and reclaim their place in Christ's ministry, as they call upon God of life! According to Oduyoye (2008:83) Jesus rendered women service, teaching them, healing them, he undertook much that was seen as women's roles and attitudes. A compassionate and caring one who anticipated people's needs. Jesus was a mother par excellence.

This paper contends that the power of healing lies from within the victim and it demonstrates how that power when unleashed leads to complete healing and restoration of life. Lastly, a call is made to the church to be an inclusive community, where both women and men are able to be in communion with each other. A place where women are able to live life in fullness, where there is no longer inequality, silence and submission. In this I am affirmed by Oduyoye' (1995:9) “I seek the quality of life that frees African women to respond to the fullness for which God created them”.

God of life

Jesus said “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”⁹ Affirming life in fullness is without a doubt Jesus's fundamental concern as reflected in this text. It shows beyond any reasonable doubt and affirms God as a giver of that life. Also as narrated in creation stories God breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life, and thus man became a living being.¹⁰ Life is therefore a gift to us which ought to be cherished and celebrated. And as stated in the WCC 10th Assembly Resource Book “a denial

⁷ Sibeko, M. & Haddad, B. (1997). Reading the Bible “with” Women in Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa,”*Semia* 78: 83

⁸ South Africa has a long history of colonisation and apartheid regime which brought a lot of oppression and exclusion on the basis of class, gender and race. The system of apartheid guaranteed that political, economic, and cultural power was controlled by the white minority. Social deprivation was heightened even further by the policy of separate development resulting in the forced removal of millions of people from their homes and a restrictive urbanization policy directed towards African people, implemented through pass laws and influx control measures. (Sibeko and Haddah “Reading the Bible”, p84)

⁹ John 10 :10b NKJV

¹⁰ Genesis 2 :7 NKJV

of life is a rejection of the God of life.¹¹ As this life is given to us by the Spirit, it requires that we live in a manner that reflects the Spirit of love, unity, caring for one another, embracing each other no matter how different we are. Jesus taught us that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ”.¹² Caring not only for our lives as humans but also the life of animals and the earth as per God’s mandate at creation.¹³ “Unprecedented challenges of climate change go hand in hand with the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources and leads to the destruction of the earth and to a substantial change of habitat. Global warming and ecological destruction become more a question of life or death”.¹⁴

And the church thus has a mandate to represent that life, as it embarks on its mission in the world. According to the WCC Resource Book “The church is commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life destroying forces, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world.”¹⁵

Women

Women have for centuries been silenced, their inability to express themselves I argue, rendered them weak beings. They have been trained to be submissive to men as heads of families. And their roles have been defined for them. These claims have unfortunately been supported by those with interest in their emphasis of scriptural passages from St Paul “...women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says”¹⁶ and “wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord...”¹⁷. This stance has unfortunately affected women globally leading to the emergence of Feminist and Womanist theologies. Giving rise to a lot of campaigns for recognition of women especially in the Church. **A cry to God of life**

Women in Korea

¹¹ Resource Book WCC 10th Assembly Busan, 2013 p 51

¹² Galatians 3 v 28 (NIV)

¹³ Genesis 2 : 15 NKJV

¹⁴ Alternative Globalisation Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) Call to Action (WCC) 2006

¹⁵ Resource Book WCC 10th Assembly Busan , 2013 p52-53

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 14 v 34 (NIV)

¹⁷ Ephesians 5 v 22 (NIV)

Koreans have been brought up under the influence of 'Confucianism'¹⁸ a way of life thought by Confucius in the 5th-6th Century BC, which is viewed sometimes as philosophy, sometimes as religion. A socio-political doctrine having religious qualities. And the main principle being 'humanism'. It was however legitimised as the national religion of Korea since Yi Dynasty (1392-1910).

Confucianism according to Kang (2013:51-64) introduced into Korean society the principle of 'agnation', which made men alone the structurally relevant members of society and relegated women to social dependence. It teaches argues Kan, that it is impossible for women to attain an equal and just relationship with men as beings created equally in the image of God in Christianity. She further argues that Korean tradition legitimises men more than women. She writes "This androcentric construction of Korean tradition has permeated every sector of Korean society through textbooks on national history and national language, media, or all means of education. It has also contributed to essentialising the difference between women and men, and to naturalizing the androcentric construction of Korea as a nation."¹⁹

"Confucian misogyny equates women with inferior persons even in the reproduction process, considering mother just a bottle, which is similar to the Aristotelian false biology that sees mother as mere container", posits Kang. Women were also excluded from participating in the Confucian ancestral rites.

Born from this context Korean women opted for Christianity, because it spoke of equality as thought by Jesus. It affirmed their role in the church and in society. They were taught of Jesus who cared for the outcasts, the marginalised, the weak and poor, granting a voice to the voiceless. Women were granted individual names and for them it meant self independence and self awareness.

"...Christianity provided a space for women to become equal members of the church with men, a space for women to affirm that they were as human as men were, and an opportunity to learn how to read and write, which, Confucian culture extremely discouraged by prohibiting women from learning and studying the Confucian texts"²⁰

¹⁸ To read more on Confucianism <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism>. Date visted 04 February 2014

¹⁹ Kang, N. (2013) In Lorke, M. & Dietrich, W. (Eds) (p 51-64)

²⁰ Kim Helen, as cited in Kang In Lorke, M. & Dietrich, W. (Eds) (p 61)

Later however Christianity according to Kang ‘incorporated with the Confucian culture and started putting emphasis on the Pauline text with regards to women. “The Christian message of love and sacrifice, she argues, became patriarchalised, which led women to accept their own victimisation/oppression under kyriarchy in the name of Jesus’ love and sacrifice for humanity”²¹ **A cry to God of life**

Women in South Africa

African women in South Africa have experienced what many womanists and feminists call the “triple oppression”²² of race, class and gender. It is only recently that it has been acknowledged that the majority of the poor are women. *The Reconstruction and Development Programme: A Policy Framework* (African National Congress) is the first official document in South Africa to acknowledge the subordinated status of women and make recommendations to redress their legal, economic, and political status. However, even this document fails adequately to involve women in the analysis and restructuring of patriarchal society (Agenda Collective).²³

Black women have been oppressed on the basis of their skin colour and gender by the apartheid regime as well as the patriarchal culture of subordination. They were stripped of any right and had no rights or ownership even of their own bodies. Their socially defined roles were those of bearing children, cooking, taking care of the family as well as grooming the girl child into that role.

Furthermore, Sibeko & Haddad argue that this oppression was also visible in the church. Even though the majority of members in most churches were women, they were silenced by the patriarchal system, deprived of any leadership positions. While many of the missionary-initiated churches now ordain women to positions of ministerial leadership, the numbers coming forward for ordination are comparatively few. Church structures continue to be patriarchal and male-dominated.

²¹ Kang (2013) p 63

²² Triple oppression is a theory developed by black socialists in the United States, such as Claudia Jones. http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_oppression. Date visited 23 January 2014

²³ Sibeko and Haddad 1997: 84

One of the challenges I have encountered as a female pastor, is resistance in acceptance. I have been addressed in a masculine form “*tata mfundisi*”,²⁴ especially in the most rural areas. Whenever I went to a place to minister or to conduct funerals, my arrival would be welcomed by suspicion because I am a woman, even so a young one! The only time I got to feel acceptance would be when I have met their ‘expectations’. Unlike my male colleagues who are readily accepted. In some instances family traditions denied females to proceed to the cemetery during funerals.

As a pastor working with women in the church, I observed that they are still bound by the patriarchal culture and the repercussions of the apartheid regime. Even though they are now in leadership, they still feel obliged to being submissive to men, with a pure understanding that a man is the *head*. They decline certain tasks such as conducting funerals, chairing meetings. With the majority of them being employed as domestic workers, I also observed that some still see themselves as second rate citizens. Such a mentality hinders the development and independence of women, not only in church, at home and in society at large.

The social status has changed a bit in the Post Apartheid South Africa, some women now are able to further their studies, own property, businesses, women are ordained and are given leadership roles by the society at large. For some unfortunately it is still very much a challenge to break through, they were brought up as nobodies, and that was affirmed by the church. It still remains in their minds that they are Black, and female which was derogatory and shameful to some extents. And this remaining follows Rambo’s theology of “remaining” and “breathing”, where she argues that in the immediate wake of the trauma, people do not have hope for the future.²⁵ **A Cry to God of Life**

Interpretation of Mark 5 v21-34²⁶

A Dead Girl and a sick woman

v21 When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. v22 Then one of the synagogue

²⁴ Xhosa word literally translated as ‘Father Pastor’

²⁵ For more insights on theology of “remaining” and “breathing” see , Rambo,S. (2010). Spirit and Trauma A Theology of Remaining; Louisville:Westminister John Knox,chapter 5

²⁶ NIV

rulers, named Jarius, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet v 23 and pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” v24 So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. v25 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. v26 She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. v27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, v28 because she thought “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” v29 Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

v30 At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” v31 “You see the people crowding against,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, “Who touched me?” v32 But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. v33 Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. v34 He said to her “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

In the text as cited above, we find two incidents where healing is performed and life is restored into fullness. In the first one Jesus is approached by Jairus, a synagogue ruler²⁷ who fell at Jesus’ feet and pleaded earnestly with Jesus to heal her dying daughter. On the onset, we are made to know of this man’s name and his status in society. On the other hand is a woman, unnamed, but defined by a condition which separates her from communion with other people as well as with God. She is defined as ‘a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years’. According to Hubbard (1985:8) “Scholars and preachers, traditionally male, are embarrassed by menstruation. Better to call her problem a haemorrhage and not dig too deeply into the background of the account.”²⁸

What is common about the two women is that they are both unnamed, the girl is only referred to as a daughter to Jarius and the unnamed woman simply has no identity, and no sense of belonging. Furthermore because of her condition she could not even be attached to either a father or husband. In their interpretation of Genesis 16, Russell and Tribble (2006:187)

²⁷ As a synagogue ruler he belonged to a certain class, a title which rendered him honorable

²⁸ Hubbard, M. (1985). The woman who never stopped menstruating, Daughters of Sarah 11 no 6 N-D:8

argue that “The predicament of patriarchy that Hagar and Sarah represent is that , women’s ability to bear children and to love and nurture them is a powerful biological tool that has been constructed socially to support the “rule of the father” over the mother and over all slaves, dependent persons, and property in the household. They further argue that “the dualistic and hierarchal structure of this house hold is reinforced by an understanding that a free woman’s identity is dependent on the father, husband, and son to whom she belongs.” From an African context, Oduyoye (1995:4) argues that “...the very idea of a “free woman” conjures up negative images. We have been brought up to believe that a woman should always have a suzerain, that she should be “owned” by a man , be her father, uncle, or husband.”

The girl referred to as Jarius’ daughter is twelve years old, which marks an entrance into womanhood. A possibly age to begin menstruation and thus opening the possibility of motherhood. The woman on the other hand has been bleeding for twelve years. She was unclean and therefore everything she touched became unclean. “...and there is a pervasive attitude arising from a complex interplay of cultural practice and the Levitical texts that women are "unclean" as a result of menstruation. Those that are in lay leadership are prevented from performing duties when they are menstruating”.²⁹

This woman has according to society not fulfilled her role as a woman, that of motherhood as she has no child. Therefore both these women are healed and restored into life at the twelfth year.

The synagogue ruler came upfront to Jesus fell at His feet, he had power that allowed him to walk with pride. He had a name and honor. Whilst the woman with no name , disempowered, broken comes from behind as if she was ashamed? She was ashamed, her condition brought shame upon her. She had no one to listen to her, she was a nobody in society. For twelve years she carried that shame, to a point where she felt the need to hide herself from Jesus too.

Though clothed in shame she could still converse with herself, since maybe she has not been in conversation with anyone for twelve years. “If I only touch His clothes I will be healed” is the only powerful tool this woman had, she has been to doctors for years searching for healing which she never received. She now had nothing to loose and the only remaining

²⁹ Sibeko and Haddah p 85

possibility was that of defiling Jesus through her defilement. Not only did she converse with herself, she took an action, she touched Jesus, the God of life and she immediately received healing. She was restored into life both as a human being and as a woman.

Jesus realised that his power had gone out from him and turned around. “Who touched my clothes?”, Jesus asked, and at this point though healed the woman was stuck in what Rambo (2010:111) refers to as “the middle”, where faith is unsure and a person is frightened for the future. Realising that she had nowhere to hide anymore and in fact no reason to do so, she came and fell at Jesus’ feet and confessed. She had received the gift of life and in the same manner as Jarius, empowered she came facing Jesus and knelt in his feet. This unnamed woman through her faith, bravery and strong will “*If I only touch His clothes I will be healed*”, not only came from behind she made Jesus turn around to look her in the face; thus reclaiming the restoration of her identity which was then affirmed when Jesus referred to her as “daughter”. Granting her a sense of belonging. This is a moment for witness, where perhaps even the words of Jesus “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*”³⁰ started to have meaning to this daughter.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore the theme of the WCC Assembly 2013 and GETI “God of life lead us to justice and peace”. In doing so, the paper raised the injustices levelled against women and as a cry to God of life interpreted the text of Mark 5 v 21-34 from a woman, and in particular a South African black woman context, in an attempt to unmask any biases in order to ensure that the hermeneutical process is liberatory and not oppressive.

By pointing to the conversation the woman held from within herself, this paper suggests that the power of healing belongs to those who have been put behind. It is about the recognition of history and the reclaiming of power that we all have that doors for healing are opened. And that healing is only brought into fruition by God of life!. This text amongst other texts³¹ throughout the gospels reveals that Jesus regarded women as human beings and as part of creation. According to Oduyoye (2008:83) “Jesus rendered women service, teaching them, healing them, he undertook much that was seen as women's roles and attitudes. A compassionate and caring one who anticipated people's needs. Jesus was a mother par

³⁰ John 10 v 10

³¹ To name a few; John 11 v 26-27, Matthew 26 v 6-13, John 8 v 1-11

excellence”. The church as the body of Christ, has a mandate to be that place where healing is orchestrated intentionally. Where women are rendered service, taught, empowered and integrated in Christ’s ministry and that of the church. A place where women are liberated and are “...free to respond to the fullness for which God created them”³²

7. Bibliography

Hubbard, M. (1985). *The woman who never stopped menstruating*; Daughters of Sarah 11 no 6 N-D:8-10

Jones, S, (2009). *Trauma and Grace Theology in a Ruptured World*; Louisville:Westminster John Knox

Kang, N. (2013). Reclaiming Theological Significance of Women’s Religious Choice-in-Differential:Korean Women’s Choice of Christianity. In Lorke, M. & Werner, D. (Eds), *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*. A Reader for Theological Education. (pp 51-64)World Council of Churches Publications

Nadar, S. (2003). *Power,Ideology and Interpretaion/s:Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Natal

Oduyeye, M. A. (1995). *Daughters of Anowa*. African Women and Patriarchy. Orbis Books, Maryknoll,NY

Oduyeye, M. A. (2008). *Women’s Presence in the Life andTeaching of Jesus with Particular Emphasis on His Passion*. Ecumenical Review 60 no 1-2 Ja-Ap : 82-89

Rambo, S. (2010). *Spirit and Trauma A Theology of Remaining*; Louisville:Westminster John Knox

Sibeko, M. & Haddad, B. (1997). *Reading the Bible “with” Women in Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa*. Semia 78:83-92Russell L.M. & Tribble, P. (Eds).

(2006). *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children- Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*; Westminster John Knox Press

WCC 10th Assembly Resource Book, Busan 2013

³² Oduyoye 1995 p9