

TUMEKUTANA 2015

BIBLICAL EXPOSITION ON THE ON CONFERENCE THEME

THEME: FREEDOM IN CHRIST: FROM SLAVERY TO EMPOWERMENT

Supporting text: "Woman; you are set free from your ailment." (Luke 13:12 NRSV)

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Introduction

We recognize that as African women, we face similar challenges despite the fact that we live in different locations. We, Presbyterian women have, therefore, endeavoured to come together every three years to address these challenges from a Christian perspective, acknowledging our need for one another in facing these challenges and appreciating the empowerment derived from mutual support and fellowship.¹

In 2007, we gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, on the theme 'Facing the Challenges of our time from a Christian Perspective'. In 2011, we gathered in Kigali, Rwanda, on the theme 'Women as agents of Peace and Reconciliation'. This year, we have gathered in Abokobi, Ghana, on the theme 'Freedom in Christ; from Slavery to Empowerment'.

This theme is based on the story found in Luke 13:10-17 about a woman with a disabling spirit whom Jesus set free.

Luke 13:10-17

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ***11*** And there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ***12*** When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." ***13*** And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ***14*** But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the

¹ Culled from the draft Constitution of Tumekutana

Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." 15 Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? 16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" 17 As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

A few insights are identified in this passage.

The woman was found not in the fetish shrine, not in the occult meeting place, but in the place of worship, the Synagogue. Despite her situation, she still went to the synagogue. She did not use her situation as an excuse not to go to church. Some of us in her situation would have had a thousand and one reasons to stay away from church. She continued to go till she received her deliverance.

She had a disabling spirit. She was crippled by the disabling spirit for eighteen years. That disabling spirit for us today could be any condition, experience or situation that makes life difficult for us. There are people in our churches who have been suffering or dealing with difficult situations for a long time and are waiting to be set free one way or the other. They are waiting for Jesus to touch them through the work and ministry of His representatives including you and me.

She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. Sometimes in life, the struggles we face make it difficult for us to straighten up and move with confidence. We would rather bend down in order not to be seen. We have low self-esteem and we lack confidence. We feel there is nothing outstanding about us. There are many women in our churches who feel they have lost their self-worth and God given dignity and they cannot stand tall. Yet, the truth is that though they see themselves that way and their societies may also see them that way, Jesus does not see them that way. Jesus accords them with dignity and

respect and is willing to reach out to them and grant them release from the difficult situation. Christians who are ambassadors of Christ are called upon to step into the shoes of Jesus and accord everyone with dignity and due respect without looking down on anyone.

In the passage, Jesus called the woman forward. Jesus noticed her took the initiative to call her forward. He acted in line with His mission statement as we read in Luke 4:18. He did not require any explanation about where, how, when, or for how long she had been in that situation. His was not interested in whether she was the cause of what had happened to her or whether it was hereditary. Jesus was interested in setting her free.

When Jesus called her forward, she took an independent decision to respond to Jesus' call. She did not worry about what people were going to say or feel about what was going to happen. How many of us can take that kind of independent decision when our freedom is at stake? How many of us would not first think about what people would say and how they would feel even before thinking about what freedom this move would yield for me? Sometimes, there is the need for us to take that kind of independent decision to respond to God's call in order to realize best results.

Jesus proclaimed her freedom in the spiritual realm and touched her for her freedom to be complete. She was set free by faith. She was set free psychologically. She was set free emotionally. But He had to lay his hand on her for her to be made straight in the physical realm.

God has given God's children their healing and liberation in the spirit realm but they need someone to extend a touch to them in the physical for their liberation to materialize, to be realized or to be recognized. Unfortunately, it is at this stage that people who have been given the privilege of being the touch of God in the

lives of the suffering allow themselves to be overtaken by vices such as greed, selfishness, favouritism, abuse, harassment, wickedness and corruption. This is where Christians who are supposed to be the hand of Christ touching the ailing woman rather find joy in taking advantage of the vulnerable. This is the point where distortion of scripture, deception, and extortion of money, misappropriation and embezzlement of funds take place. This is the point where, many a time, Satan is allowed to use the agent to intercept the liberation process. We need to pray that we would never be an obstacle in the way of Jesus' touch but rather would be an instrument of grace extending Jesus's touch to God's people.

The woman did not have to move out of the synagogue to receive her freedom. She received her liberation right where she had been for eighteen years. We need to recognize that sometimes our liberation comes to us right where we are in our regular place of abode. In search for relief and freedom, people are coerced into going into new environments which sometimes end up as mirages. People waste time, lose relationships, lose their faith, end up in a worse state, and sometimes lose their lives in the process of seeking freedom from their social, religious, moral and economic ailments. The whole earth is the Lord's and He is capable of giving freedom and release and healing to God's people wherever they find themselves to be.

The ruler of the synagogue had a reservation against the woman's freedom and made a comment about the timing as if that was what mattered most. (John 13:14) He was not very happy about the release from ill health that the woman had experienced. Maybe, he was ashamed about his inability to do something about it. Maybe he was envious that Jesus was going to have all the glory. Maybe her freedom was going to mean the end of her regular presence in the synagogue which would mean a reduction in his congregation. After one is liberated from a situation of suffering, there are people who would still find fault with one's new

state. There are people who would prefer that one remain in one's state of slavery and suffering. Not all will be happy with the freedom that Christ brings.

The good side to this is the fact that there were others who were delighted at what had happened to the woman. We need to strive to be amongst those who would rejoice with those who are set free from their ailments and challenges. Let us endeavour to be part of those who would rejoice with women who are liberated. When envy raises its ugly head, let us ask God for grace to let go of it and celebrate God's goodness to women around us.

Having unpacked this package of scripture, what are some of the situations related to women in Africa that would pass as slavery for which freedom is required?

Examples of such situations are the following:

Situations in which a person is deprived of her human rights such as

- Right to employment
- Right to accommodation
- Right to safe water and sanitation
- Right to constant energy and power
- Right to food
- Right to rest
- Right to health care
- Right to achieving one's dreams and ambitions in life
- Right to education

Usually, where these rights elude women, there is a perpetrator, a slave master or an oppressor. It would be interesting to hold a discussion on who we consider to be the slave masters of our day.

Secondly, there are situations in which people are striped off their entitlement to choose what they really desire in life. People are found in situations of being controlled by a dictator at work, home, and unfortunately at church. People are forced to act against their will or desire. In some widowhood experiences, even what rightfully belongs to the woman is taken away from her by her husband's family. Some women are forced to lose custody of their children because if they insist on keeping them, their fathers would refuse to take care of them. Some women are prevented from reaching their full potential in life. Others find themselves in situations where growth and development are curtailed by a significant person in their lives.

Thirdly, there are situations in which people are seemingly stripped off their God given dignity. These would include women who are traumatized by gross disrespect from people close to them such as husbands and children, people who are stigmatized because of their health conditions such as HIV/ AIDS, widows who are dehumanized by negative traditional practices, house-helps who are oppressed and sometimes abused by those they work for and elderly women who are branded as witches and abandoned in witch camps by their families.

Economically, people, including women, are forced to sell their products at unfair prices dictated by market lords. Subsistence farmers, most of whom are women who feed their families and communities cannot take loans to expand their farms because they do not have properties to present to banks as collateral.

Health wise, there are sick people who are denied quality health care because they cannot afford it. In our passage for discussion, the woman had been denied health care in its fullness for eighteen years.

Yesterday, we visited the slave castle at Elmina. We were enlightened on what the slaves of that time went through. We are aware that that kind of slavery has been abolished; but there are other forms of slavery taking place in different forms and at different places around the world and, particularly, on our African Continent. There are many people, including some of us here, who find themselves in slavery of some sort and all they require is for a representative of Jesus to come along and play a role that would set them free. As members of the body of Christ, ambassadors of Christ, representatives of Christ, we should always pray that God would enable us to identify that role that He expects us to play in this regard.

It would be helpful for us to explore some of the roles we as Christian women are expected to play in seeking freedom for girls who are captured by Boko Haram terrorist, women who are deceived and trafficked into slavery in the Middle East, women who are being used now as suicide bombers instead of being bearers of life, women and girls who are raped, defiled, and sexually harassed by relatives, armed robbers, soldiers, teachers, doctors, pastors, colleagues and bosses at work, victims of Female Genital Mutilation, and elderly women who are branded as witches and abandoned in witch camps, and women who have a calling for ordained ministry and yet are denied access by church authorities.

On the other hand, in line with the story, some of us would step in the shoes of the lady needing liberty from a difficult situation in which we feel absolutely helpless. Maybe yours has lasted for more than eighteen years or maybe yours is even less. Whatever the case is, Jesus is not late in coming because He still lives and is amongst us. It might have seemed so long but never give up on hope. Never resign in fear. Jesus is around and is just waiting for the right time to show up.

Let us pray for grace to hold on, to keep hope alive, to stay focused, and to remain expectant. As children of God, despite our difficulties and suffering, we can still be hopeful because as Romans 5:3-5 says, suffering, pressure, affliction and hardship produce perseverance which constitutes patient and unswerving endurance; and this develops maturity of character and tried integrity leading to

joy and confident hope of eternal liberation.²Such hope never fails or shames us because it is dependent on God's love which is limitless. We should always remember that Jesus, our Saviour, is interested in our situation.

Others may be the one in charge of the synagogue watching others struggle for a long time without bothering to offer any help in finding solution to the problem. In that regard, some of us may have children or young relatives who may be needing some kind of attention and help for a long time and we look unbothered to play any role in getting them out of that situation. The woman in the story could be our mum, our daddy, our aunt, our niece, a colleague at work or a member in our church. God may be expecting us to take an initiative or take a step that will bring liberation, independence, healing, release or freedom closer to this person. It could be an advocacy role, taking time to pray, sharing an encouraging word to remind the person that Jesus still cares or actually offering something material to this person concerned.

The Christian family should be ready to receive accommodate and love those who are set free wholeheartedly without stigmatization. When PLWHIVA are treated with ARTs and they regain their health, we should accept them without discrimination. We should prevent the kind of situation that was seen in Gushiegu, a town in the Northern part of Ghana, where, through the initiatives of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, elderly women accused of witchcraft were set free and the witch camp was going to be closed down. However, a few of the women did not want to leave because of what they knew they were going to face from their families. They preferred to stay in the camp and continue to glean grain from the market grounds for food. They considered the witch camp as a place of refuge from stigmatization. Question is, what does the freedom that Christ brings mean to elderly women in that situation? How can this freedom get to them?

We can leave this gathering assured that by virtue of our believe that we are Christians, our very status is one of freedom from being slaves to sin, where sin refers to actions, behaviours and attitudes unpleasing to God. (Romans 6:5-7) The

² Using the Amplified Version of the Bible

Bible says in Romans 6:18 that through Christ Jesus, we have been set free from being slaves to sin into being “slaves” to righteousness. My little critique there though would be not to use the term slave in this new status because a slave does not act according to her will. She is forced to act. I do not think we should feel forced to lead righteous lives. It should come out naturally by virtue of Christ living in us. Therefore instead of being “slaves” to righteousness, I would rather be transferred from being a slave to sin to being an “agent” of righteousness where I have some level of agency in wanting to and being able to act in ways that please God through God’s grace. I would rather be wholeheartedly willing to lead a life pleasing to God through all my actions than be forced to do so. This will happen as a result of my total submission to Jesus Christ in order to be fully indwelt by His Spirit who will strengthen me to do what pleases God. (2nd Corinthians 3:17)

Our call to freedom through Jesus Christ should not be misused. Galatians 5:13 exhorts Christians, church leaders, presbyters, children of God, sisters in Christ not to use our freedom to indulge in selfishness but rather serve one another in love. As Presbyterian women leaders, let us never be tempted to lord it over the women we lead. We are not set free to be bosses but to be servants of love and grace towards those we lead. Our freedom in Christ should result in a growing commitment to bearing one another’s burdens, being humble and being good to everyone in obedience to the will of God.

Freedom without empowerment is sometimes problematic because there is the tendency for the one set free to go back into the state of slavery just to survive. Some women who get pregnant after being raped are forced to get married to their perpetrators just to survive and, unfortunately, face abuse for the rest of their lives because they were not wanted in the first place. Freed and liberated women need to be empowered socially, psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. These goals could be the underpinnings for the programmes we run for women in our churches.

Scripture tells us in John 8:36 that whoever the Son sets free is free indeed. In the days of the biblical narratives, it was legal for a slave to be adopted into the family

of the master. The slave needed to stop “slave talk and learn to talk and behave like a son or daughter”. He had been told all along that nothing belonged to him; but as a daughter or a son, she is told everything hers. A freed person needs to recognize her authority and power. As Jesus the Son, goes boldly to the Father, so should we who are set free go boldly to God in prayer recognizing that God raised us together with Him and has seated us together with Him. (Hebrews 10:11) We are seated with Christ at a place where all our enemies are turned into our footstool and we are above all principalities and powers. We are not just in this world as orphans, but as joint heirs with Jesus Christ. (Colossians 3:1&2)

As we draw this exposition to a close, let us always remember that it is Jesus Christ’s desire to set people free from all ailments and difficulties. There are still many people who need to be set free. Christ is depending on us, His followers, to extend his touch to those needing to be set free one way or the other. Our freedom as Christians should bring freedom other people in difficult situations. May God remove all situations of slavery from our midst and truly set us truly free as individuals, the body of Christ, and indeed as people of Africa and beyond. Amen!

QUESTIONS

- What are some of the practical situations in your context that could be described as slavery or ailment today?
- What do you think God is calling upon us to do in these specific situations as Presbyterian women of Africa?
- For personal reflection, referring to the story, would you consider yourself to be the woman, the synagogue official, Jesus’s representative, or part of the others who rejoiced about what had happened?

