

The Women of Zimbabwe – John 5: 2-9

The origins of the World Day of Prayer date back to the 19th century when Christian women in the USA and Canada initiated a variety of cooperative activities in support of women's involvement in mission, at home and abroad. It is from such roots as these that the WDP has taken its present shape – a worldwide ecumenical movement of Informed Prayer and Prayerful Action. For many years it was called the Women's World Day of Prayer. And in many churches in the past decades this was the only occasion on which women lead worship and entered the pulpit. This year's WDP was celebrated all over the world last Friday.

Concern for women and children was the original interest of the women who began the World Day of Prayer. They did not give in but followed their goals when they met strong opposition from all-male mission boards and church councils. The women founded numerous and effective women's boards for foreign and home missions, whereby they could work directly with and for women and children...

Since 1812 women had encouraged one another to engage in personal prayer and to lead communal prayer. This emphasis on prayer led to annual days and weeks of prayers within individual denominations.

Every year, the worship service focuses on a different country and a specific theme. World Day of Prayer National Committees of a country prepare the order of worship which is then used in the whole world.

Through preparation and participation in the worship service, people worldwide learn how their sisters & brothers of other countries, languages and cultures understand the biblical passages in their context. They learn of the concerns and needs of those women and to empathize and feel in solidarity with them.

Through the World Day of Prayer, people are encouraged to become aware of the other countries and cultures and no longer live in isolation. They are also encouraged take up the burdens of other people, to sympathize with the problems of other countries and cultures and pray with and for them. The World Day of Prayer aims to demonstrate that prayer and action are inseparable and that both have immeasurable influence in the world.

This year the women from Zimbabwe speak to us. They invite us to come together in worship. Many of the texts and songs used in this Sunday service today are from the liturgy which was used last Friday.

The Bible text this year is Jesus' encounter with a person who, although in a place, where healing can take place, had not acted upon the opportunities given. Jesus asked – "Do you want to be made well?"

The women of Zimbabwe help us reflect – and with what I am presenting to you now, I am staying very close to the suggestions from Zimbabwe. This is not so much “my” sermon, but thoughts put together and shared with us now by our Christian sisters in Africa.

And here they ask us:

“Do you want to be made well?”

You are faced with this life-changing question.

What are you going to do?

Our sisters from Zimbabwe are taking Jesus’ encounter to be a call to act in love for peace and reconciliation. “The action verbs suggest that we should not be afraid to act on the word of God. God is offering us the steps for personal and social transformation.”

“Rise! Take Your Mat and Walk,” said Jesus.

And our sisters from Zimbabwe invite us to stand up and act.

We are empowered to take up our mats, they say.

No more waiting powerlessly on the mat.

The painting by Nonhlanhla Mathe on the front page of our Bulletins, invites us to give a healing hand to the needy.

The painter says: Let us embrace children with love as their future is ahead, and let us open our arms in joy as the time to rise up has come. This is the time for change!

With this introduction let us take a closer look at the Bible verses chosen for us.

We are invited to ask the following questions:

When did the story happen? (v. 1)

Where did it happen? (v. 2)

Who was involved in the story? (vv. 3, 5, 6)

How did it happen? (vv. 6–9a)

What happened?

Jesus had gone to Jerusalem during the festival of the Jews.

The scenery of the story is well described in John 5. There was a pool near the Sheep Gate where people with different illnesses and disabilities went for healing.

The people by the pool believed that healing was in the water; hence, the man in the story would expect his healing to come from the water. As he was unable to get into the stirred-up water by himself, he could not see how he would be healed. So, he waited on his mat for the next opportunity.

What does this encounter say about the man?

The man in the story seemed to be a lonely person; he had nobody to help him get healed. He was stuck and powerless.

Maybe that was what led Jesus to ask him a life-changing question: “Do you want to be made well?”

What does this encounter say about Jesus?

Jesus acted with compassion, love, understanding, and caring.

Jesus in his humanity could identify himself with human suffering.

Jesus in his humility could listen to the man without judging his excuses. Jesus gave the man a chance.

What does this encounter tell us about God?

Jesus used three action verbs to enable the man who had been sick for 38 years to experience God’s love: “Rise! Take your mat and walk.”

The dialogue of Jesus with that man may take us beyond physical healing.

The action verbs may suggest that we should not be afraid to act on the word of God. God is offering the steps for personal and social transformation.

What does it mean to listen to God’s Word today?

The Word of God comes alive today in our own context.

What are the contexts today? The answer from Zimbabwe is: the need for peace and reconciliation.

Zimbabwe experienced political violence for many years. And the traumas and tensions are still alive in the communities. In the process of bringing reconciliation, it is said that we must forgive, but just saying it does not make it happen.

“We need to be able to accept that we have been hurt and go through the process of healing. Others need to acknowledge that they have hurt us, and show they are sorry. We need to listen to each other. Peace begins with me and with you. The ingredient of peace is love, and where there is reconciliation, peace comes” – are the words of a woman from Zimbabwe.

In the historical context of Zimbabwe, peace and reconciliation may refer to overcoming the traumas of armed conflicts by a peace-building process.

When the violence erupted in 2008 around the national elections, women were targeted and subjected to abuse.

Truth, justice, forgiveness, repentance, and even reparations are steps usually taken by truth and reconciliation commissions.

A national political reconciliation may bring peace and security to communities.

At the same time, churches or community organizations may also develop their own peace-building processes, enabling victims to overcome traumas, raising public awareness to help prevent violence, or promoting training for sustainable community development.

The women of Zimbabwe attempt to view the story through Jesus’ eyes.

They say: “The miracle and transformation in the Bible story are symbolized by the mat.

The mat was the place the man lay down with his excuses, even though he was searching for healing.

After the encounter with Jesus, the mat became a reminder of this healing.”

Jesus empowers people to be made well by doing something for the transformation that God is offering - to rise and take up our mat, whatever that may be for us, and walk.

Jesus empowers us to choose to be healed, to be made whole, perhaps physically, mentally, spiritually, or socially.

When we are made whole, we are reconciled to God, to ourselves, and to our community. When we are reconciled, we can truly love, and when we truly love, we are able to walk toward peace.

So, “Rise! Take your mat and walk.”

Our sisters invite us to meditate on the following questions:

1. What is the context that you or your community live in that needs to hear Jesus’ life-changing question, “Do you want to be made well?” For example, in the context of violence, the question can be reworded as “Do you want to live in peace?”
2. What are the obstacles or excuses given that are not allowing transformation? For example, in the context of violence, what are the excuses for not building peace and reconciliation?
3. What does “Rise! Take your mat and walk!” mean in my life?
4. What are the steps to love, to reconciliation, and to living in peace in the family, workplace, church, community, or nation?

Silence

And to finish these reflections, comes a prayer from Zimbabwe:

God of Peace,

we pray for everyone to come to know that,
despite political, religious, and social differences,
we need to love,
to reconcile with each other,
and have peace.

We pray for broken homes to be reconciled,
for women to live in security,
and for communities to be open to peacebuilding.
In the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus, we pray.
Amen.