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Signs of Hope: African Woman's Perspective in the Current Re-reading and Re-interpreting of the Bible in the Lutheran Communion

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Introduction

In the last few decades, women have been engaged in re-reading and re-interpreting the Scriptures, and it has become one of the key components in the Lutheran Communion's major dialogues. This has been a journey where communities have seen new realities, uncovered and rediscovered with potentials for transformation. However, the new realities have uncovered frustrations, pains and wounds that have been brought by injustices done by misinterpretation of the Scriptures through the systemic oppressive structures and cultures in our societies carried over for many generations. There is a need of an interpretation that would continue to bring equality, justice, liberation, hope, healing and restore the humanity. In other words doing what we say. This article tries to lift up some areas that need further discussion and dialogue in the Biblical interpretation in the global community.

Re-reading Josh. 2: 1-16

The text presents the story of the Israelites under the new leadership of Joshua. Joshua is sending the spies to spy out the land that they were about to enter, as he says to them: "Go view the land, especially Jericho" (v.1). In the rest of the chapter, the main character is Rahab who is introduced as a prostitute as the main qualities of her personality.

The spies entered her house and spent a night. It did not take long before the news of Rahab having two new men reached the king of the whole land, in Africa probably a village chief of a clan leader? However, Rahab having a mission from the Almighty God, she had to hide the spies in her roof and lied to the king. The one who is sending her in this mission of deliverance is greater than all the earthly kings and in particular the king of Jericho. Rahab had to look for all kind of possible ways to effect the mission. She sent a response to her king saying; "True, the men came to me, but did not know where they came from. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them", (v. 4).

Rahab still had another task to fulfill, as a woman she is a protector of her family, a care taker. Once she knew that there will be an invasion and the Israelites are powerful people and God has already given them the land. She had to struggle for the survival of her family, her extended family, her father's house. "Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us...., The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death'. Then men said to her, "our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land." (vv.8, 11, 12-14). The story ends with Rehab being spared from destruction and death, herself and her whole extended family.

Rehab the Prostitute: Interpretation of the text through a woman's eye.

Like most women in African, Rahab, is playing her prescribed gender role she is a family care taker. Also she has been raised up learning how to welcome and show hospitality to the strangers (spies). This correlates to Kimilike's idea as he says, "... caring spirit is found as one of the qualities that African women have in their experience of being the primary care givers in the African families"¹ Living in a patriarchal society, Rahab is feeling torn apart between the powers of male supremacy. She is in-charge of her father's house, and being answerable to the king for the unknown male-guests she is bringing in her house. As prostitute, in a shame and honor society, she would not be honored for what she was doing out of her prostitution i.e., selling her body for the welfare of her family. However she could then be honored for saving her family from death and destruction when the Israelites conquered the land.

This is the dilemma the facing most women in the church and communities in Africa, there are so many cases of women who have been condemned by the society and given all kinds of names because of what they do to earn the living. The question would be, why are they doing that sort of business, who and what pushes them into such a business. What are strategic ways to relieve them from such businesses like prostitution etc. And above all, the blindness of seeing a person from what she does instead of seeing from who she is. Rahab is a child of God first before she becomes a prostitute. God surely did not create her a prostitute. She was created in the image and likeness of God, (Ref. Gen. 1: 26-28). These are humanity qualities that the church should continue to claim for men and women equally. Nevertheless, when one is condemned for prostitution no one cares about the men that goes to bed with her all the time and are not even given any particular name in the society, (at least in Africa there is no name for a man who has multiple sexual partners and does that for business). Since such a behavior takes both male and female, there is a need to break the silence and stop the double-standard.

It is easy to see how much Rahab's society is suffering from a sexual shame. It is willing to accept the help and support from Rehab, but her main quality is prostitution which is shameful to her family and society so whatever she does has to be monitored by everyone in town including the king. I believe this is not new to our African societies.

The story of Rahab has been interpreted by many scholars in various ways. Also preachers have tried to express their anger on the behavior or qualities of Rahab, being a prostitute. Some conventional interpreters argue that: for the Canaanite religion, prostitution was part of religious rituals. While this could be true in some way, it is not true in societies that condemn the practice to the extent of making it illegal. There are stories of many women in our cities who are victims of prostitution and who are chased by police officers for breaking the law, the whole society looks down on them as the 'social misfits', and unfortunately they end up in being more victimized in various ways.

¹ Lechion Kimilike. "Developing Resources of hope to Eradicate Violence Against Women in African Context." *Makumira: African Theological Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2008.

Instead of seeing Rahab as a child of God first and a forgiven sinner, the first quality is her character, her behavior, her outer being. Prostitution is what qualifies her personality. She is identified by her personality: being a prostitute. Andrew Lester, a proponent in narrative perspective shows how narrative relates to identity in saying, "... human personality is storied. Human beings do not simply tell story or, illustrate their lives with story telling. We construct our sense of identity out of stories, both conscious stories and those we suppress."² The narrative process of any individual (including the language, image and symbols) is affected by the narrative structuring of the larger culture and the meanings that are attached to gender, politics and ethnic heritage.³ While communities continue to construct narratives of their individuals, it is fairly important to consider their outcomes and how they would affect them and then start to reconstruction of the meta- narratives of our societies.

3. What are the Contributing Factors of Prostitution in Africa?

The number one systemic reason that leads many women and young girls into prostitution is poverty. Poverty is the main problem in most of the developing countries; Tanzania being one of them. It has many faces and can bring results or effects that are intergenerational. The solutions for the systemic results of poverty have to be systemic.

In a poverty stricken community, life is always a struggle from many death threats, never count about getting enough food, medical care and clothing for everyone. This is due to the fact that most peoples' income in these societies depends mainly on agriculture in a very small scale. It is an undeniable truth that many families for example in Tanzania live below the poverty line by earning less than \$ 1 a day. More than 80% of all Tanzanians live as subsistence farmers, who depend on a hand hoe in a small piece of land about 1-2 acres. A few are engaging themselves in small business just enough to get food for survival. Therefore, the poverty scale is very high.

The second reason for prostitution is role assignment and responsibilities in the family according to gender. In patriarchal families such as Tanzania and other parts of Africa, the male members are the bread winners. Due to extreme poverty, sometimes they are unable to fulfill the above responsibility. As a result women are the ones to carry an extra burden of caring for the family and raising the income under difficult circumstances which may bring them into the danger of being abused and violated even sexually. In the patriarchy mind set where women have no equal rights especially in managing and owning the family income, men and women never plan together hence not spending together.

Overpopulation and family size is another contributing factor of poverty and as a result contributes to prostitution. Poverty is much more severe where the family sizes are large. This has caused some men to run away from their families because they could not fulfill/took care of them. Again the work load falls on women. It is important to address the issues of overpopulation as it contributes to poverty. Poverty, low income and having a fairly

² Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

large family bring challenges that may result in some ethical questions of prostitution, unfaithfulness and corruption. There is a need for the church and communities to work on the above obstacle that hinders wholeness in the lives of many.

Human Sexuality: A Touchy Issue

Human sexuality in Africa at least is covered with much ignorance and silence. Very little right information is conveyed to the members especially in church communities. There is a confusion of values regarding the matter which may lead to misinformation and hence as a result misconducts in sexual behaviors.

a). The understanding of Human Sexuality in Africa

The issue of human sexuality in African societies is very much surrounded by taboos and is never spoken on openly. Since time immemorial, sexuality and its accompanying issues has been viewed and understood in various sayings, proverbs, songs, poems, riddles and many other metaphors. To a culture in which traditions were kept in form of narratives, it was easy to communicate about matters regarding sexuality in all the above ways.

However, human history has gone through many changes and transformations to shape it in various ways. Some of changes have been brought by modernization and formal education takes up the role of informal education that was provided through oral methodologies without a proper replacement. The understanding of human sexuality too, has gone through cultural and socio-economic, changes that have shaped it. From the Biblical times, societies have changed, but, still in the area of human sexuality not much has changed yet. Although there have been some changes in perception, still some practices and attitudes have never changed and are still done in the name of religion, tradition and culture.

Basically, as far as Africa is concerned, most societies are patriarchal, and still the few matriarchal ones, still the male supremacy is vividly seen. This shows in the way the society view, teach and empower gender and sexuality is not in equity in relation to female and male genders. There is a need to go back and look at all these traditions and their teachings of human sexuality in particular. William Arnold comments that “Continuing biblical and theological studies show that much of our understanding of the Bible has been shaped by generations of translators and interpreters who were distorted in their perspectives because of male dominated forms of thinking and perceiving”⁴ Also Kimilike adds, “The plight of women suffer is from complex, multi-faceted oppression: biblical and cultural abuses, negative effects of globalization and imperialism, and social injustices that include gender-based violence...”⁵

Being born in Africa where still most of these kinds of interpretation and perception are practiced, it is hard to see their impact in the society. Although it is said and believed that human sexuality is sacred, it needs time to understand it. Due to the sacredness of sexuality

⁴ Willian Anorld. *Pastoral Responses to Sexual Issues*. (Louisville, KT: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 100.

⁵ Kimilike, p. 62.

in the African context, even the sexual organs are not mentioned by their biological names. They are nicknamed or use of euphemisms and whenever are mentioned, one has to excuse him/herself. In elaborating this idea, Chege says, "Sexual taboos were prominent and widespread across societies. Terms commonly used and associated with sexuality were taboos in most African cultures. Talking openly about sex and naming the sexual organs was a taboo. Sexual activity took place but it was not talked about."⁶ The above attitude makes the whole issue of sexuality to be covered with shame and unable to talk about.

b) Human Sexuality and Procreation.

In general, the norm for male and female sexual relationships center on marriage. It is assumed that people marry for the purpose of procreation, and it is also asserted that human kind is heterosexual. There is no specific place or word for singlehood as an accepted life style even on biological or faith reasons. When it is taken to its socio-religious setting, it implies that sanctity of marriage bond, a couple can procreate I fulfillment of God's will. This is what Chege comments as he says: "All African societies, without exception, held sex as a sacred tool for the purpose of procreation only; through it life began and life was sacred. To an African, sex is more than sexual intercourse. Apart from procreation, it was the means of sustaining, maintaining and extending the clan and society. Sexual intercourse took place only in marriage."⁷

Also all extramarital relationships are forbidden and all sexual acts outside the heterosexual experience are taken as deviant sexual behavior. The punitive and restorative measures taken for such sexual deviances vary from society to society. For example among the Wameru of the northern Tanzania, adultery was punished severely. The deviants were made to lie down as if are on sexual act. Then they were pinned to the ground by a wooded spear and left there for several days until they die from too much bleeding and pain. This acted as a teaching method to others in the society against sexual misconduct.

Laurenti Magessa has this view on African marriage and sexuality as he says:

Marriage and other forms of legal sexual unions are meant to ensure procreation and the preservation of life and the life force through sexuality and its physical expression in sexual intercourse. This is recognized with great intensity of most central aspects of the initiation process is not impress upon the initiates acceptance of dignity of their own sexuality and the need to be both responsible and very proud of it.⁸

Due to the fact that life of an African is centered on religious and socio-economic ritual performances which are centered on the whole life cycle, sexuality is also one of the stages that is surrounded by ritual and belief practices. The pre-introduction of sexuality to human being starts right away at the birth of a child. There are rituals which are done to a

⁶ Kimani W. Chege. "Sexuality and Marriage in Africa." In *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*. By Bryson Arthur. (Nairobi: uzima Press, 1998), 61.

⁷ Chege, pg. 59.

⁸ Laurenti Magessa. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. (MAryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 142.

child at birth depending on the gender. For example, for a boy the women will make a joyful sound three times and for a girl it is done four or sometimes two times. This is to inform everyone in the society what gender or sex they have received. So right away whatever will be done to this child will be shaped to the acceptance of his/her sexuality and to being responsible for all kind of roles that are assigned to him/her. This will go on until the age of 12-18 years old when most children will reach their puberty. In most societies, the puberty or adolescence is normally marked by initiation rites which are also done separately for girls and for boys. From initiation on, the young people are expected to recognize the basic role of sexuality and sexual relations in the life of family and clan or ethnic group they belong. This is why in the socio-religious life an African has to go through the instructions and rituals, to ensure that each individual person accepts his/her sexuality and gender roles. In most societies, this preservation is done through rituals performances, celebrations, and taboos. Yet we ought to reflect on certain practices and taboos, and their acceptability or unacceptability in our context today.

c). Human Sexuality and Taboos.

In African societies, taboos are related to all areas of human life. For examples there are taboos related to child birth, initiation, sex and even death. In most of the taboos women are seen as source of pollution and curse related to certain taboos.

Taboos play a significant role in the ethical duty of transmitting and preserving life and the breach of them endangers the health and well-being of the society. There are taboos and laws regarding fornication, adultery, incest and sexual intercourse. In practicing these taboos, unfortunately, the female is victimized in more often than the male. The woman is crushed more often, and she faces punitive measures. Even in the case of restorative rituals she has to undergo such rituals more often than the man. For example, in most societies women are forbidden to touch the male sexual organ and even to mention it verbally. In spite of her physical and mental fitness, a woman is usually excluded for her menstrual blood, her breast milk and so forth.

Generally speaking, a menstruating woman is considered unclean and she is kept away from men, her husband, chiefs, men going for hunt, those doing sacrifices or any kind of worship, and those on business expeditions. The fear is that the super- natural power acting in her may affect business adversely. She might not even be allowed to prepare food for her husband or any other man. “Mostly the women are relegated to an outside hut or asked to keep way from areas where men are. In areas where gold is mined they are restricted from going near the mines, as this would affect the mining activities...”⁹

Among the Kinga ethnic group of Southern Tanzania, a menstruating or a bleeding woman after child birth is kept away in a hut from other members of the family until she dries up. She eats from a separate plate, bowls and her food is prepared separately by other women from the kinship.

⁹ Lloyd Fanuse, “Sexuality and Women in African Culture”, in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds.), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 143.

Among the Wameru ethnic group also from the northern Tanzania, a menstruating woman was (even today secretly) put under certain boundaries. For example, she was not allowed to sleep with her husband or any male or baby boy for the fear that the male will become impotent. She was forbidden to go closer to a local brewing place for the belief that she will stop the fermentation process. There are other examples from across the continent; for example, the Mende from West Africa believe that a woman would transmit a bad luck to a male if they have sexual intercourse while she is having her menses. At this time even a married woman is excused by her husband, who says she is busy and she has seen the moon, this implies that the wife is committed under a supernatural claim with which the husband should not compete.¹⁰

Together with the menstruation blood, both sperm and vaginal secretion during sexual intercourse are considered sacred and life giving and hence brings more taboos.

These are just a few setbacks as far as the human sexuality is perceived in Africa. Most of these practices have been misunderstood, misinterpreted and kept unchanged for centuries. Further more when Christianity was introduced into Africa, did not bother much on such practices that would hinder the full liberation of gospel to both men and women. For women Christianity meant further male domination and more rules to be implemented, unless interpretation and a contextual theology of love, equity and justice is practiced, the gospel liberation remains an illusion.

Signs of Hope

i). The Work of African Women theologians

For about two decades, the circle of the concerned African women theologians have been doing a great work in writing on *Culture, Tradition and the church in Africa*.¹¹

Also they have worked extensively on issues like the situation of women in the face of HIV and AIDS, and many more. However, the truth is, very few churches have picked these themes to be discussed and worked on at the congregation or classroom levels. In other words very little response has been taken deliberately by the churches to move forward the above themes into practices. Therefore there is a need for a persistent voice of women and men to keep on reminding the church in a larger community to continue working hard for transformation and hoping for a better future. This is a reason to live hopefully. Lester in quoting Robert Carrigan, says that, "Hope is a here and now experience that contains both pledge of things to come and 'first fruits' that can be tasted now."¹² Lester continues on saying that, "the gospel describes a God who has certainly been present and active in the past

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

¹¹ Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds.). *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*. (New York:Orbis Books, 1995).

¹² Lester, pg. 69.

is present with us today but (most importantly) this God is out in front of us calling us, inviting us into the future.”¹³

In short, God is continuously shaping and transforming the world through our own communities of believers as we continue gathering the core narratives of our stories that shape our identities, individually as children of God and communally as the church.

Like the exodus, leaving the slavery, we are about to move into the freedom and liberation announced through the gospel's 'abundant life'. But certainly we need facilitators like Rahab, who would ease the transition, only with the promise of safety and security. Here is the story of Rehab re-told as a story of empowerment and strength, a story of a heroine of faith. Surprisingly Rahab's story is re-told again in the New Testament as among the great grandmother of Jesus, the messiah (ref. Mtt. 1:5, also Hebrews 11: 31). Rahab is just a woman God could use like many others heroes and heroines of faith. This is one of the reasons to live with hope and working hard to nurture that hope. As one of the basic goals of the church's mission is to nurture the hope, and help facilitate the process of hoping for generations moving from the present and living in the future.

ii). Signs of Hope: Creating a Theology of Sexuality

Theology is the interpretation of our belief in God and is the way we get the knowledge about the God we believe. For centuries our theology as the Lutheran Church has focused much more on spirituality and intellect of its members. While we confess about human being whole and in the pastoral care ministries of the church we talk on restoration of human wholeness, but practically we do not touch all the aspects of being whole. Since we agree that sexuality is part of being human, then we should as well count a human being as whole: body mind and spirit. It is God who created us the way we are with the gift of sexuality as well as other gifts that make our personality whole.

Let us read the Bible and interpret it correctly using all texts even those refer on human sexuality which are seldom talked about.

In doing theology of human sexuality; the church needs to ask her self the following questions: a) who defines our sexuality b) what is the source of our teaching on sexuality c) who teaches our community about sexuality, including children, youth and adults?

iii). Signs of Hope: Integrating Sexuality theology in the Holistic theology

In integrating the theology of body mind and soul with the right theology of sexuality; then we would be able to answer the questions about: a) Who we are b) Is our body evil or good? c) Is it right to feel good about our bodies and ourselves? This will help us to overcome the old concept talking about the body being evil and the spirit being good.

iv) Signs of Hope: Healing the church from Sexual Shame:

¹³ Ibid.

What is sexual shame?

This question can easily be answered through the following story: In my classes of 'Pre-marriage, marriage and Family Counseling and Counseling and HIV and AIDS' I asked my students (who happen to be all of them ordained pastors doing Masters in Pastoral Theology and HIV and AIDS), What are the most issues discussed in the pastoral care and counseling in the congregations today?

The students said that they spend most of their time counseling and talking about disciplinary issues on money mismanagement and sexual misconduct. They said, "there is high rate of marital separation and divorce, pregnancies out of wedlock, concubinage (nyumba ndogo in Kiswahili), marital unfaithfulness etc."¹⁴

This is really interesting that church and church institutions are busy discussing and solving issues related to human sexuality. However from the pulpits, very few preaching texts are concerned with the above issues. Even the few texts that are picked, their message is vague and hard to comprehend and especially when thinking of having different age groups sitting together in the worship services. What can the church do?

We still hear stories of rape, incest and other sexual violence spoken in secret because are committed by respectful adults and it is shameful to talk about it or it is a curse in the family. I think it is a more curse when is kept as a secret because there is no room for healing to the individual and to the congregation. We still hear stories of pastors who have affairs with their congregants, or who would do the premarital counseling to the couple but also make sure that they coerce the young women for sexual relationships. How about those who are not getting employment without providing sexual favor to their employers or someone in-charge of them?

Karen Mackilick has the following comment as she says;

"When we do not talk about sexuality, we reinforce media images of it as separate from spirituality. The gap between sexuality and spirituality is a place where shame grows...The sexuality and spirituality need to be taught in the same curriculum..."¹⁵

Talking about sexuality encourage healthy respectful conversation, dialogue relationship that results into healing of those wounded in their past relationships and experience community care, love and God's forgiveness. This would be a church of Christ where the gospel message becomes, nurturing, caring, liberating, and empowering.

6. Conclusion

This paper has mainly focused on the need of re-interpretation and re-reading of the bible in the global church today. The story of Rahab in the book of Joshua has been used as a

¹⁴ Classroom discussions at Makumira University, 2008.

¹⁵ Karen A. MacClintock. *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 12.

text of reference. The major issue that need more attention and right interpretation is human sexuality and the issues that are raised its contextual and traditional perception and practices. Failure to pay such attentions, more injustice will continue to be done especially to women.

It is the hope of African women that the church community would continue to strive for equality and integrity of humanity and join in persistent voices of new interpretations of the bible in our contexts today. These would be the signs of hope.