

## **CONFERENCE THEME : IGNITING MISSION; BREAKING BARRIERS.**

READINGS : Galatians 3: 21-29

: Luke 13: 10-17

THEME : Jesus sets us free!

### Introduction:

The Presiding Bishop and members of Conference 2016!

I feel privileged to be asked to share the word of God at the opening service of this special Conference of celebration and thanksgiving for the 40 years of the ordination of women in the MCSA!

Allow me to reflect on one of the familiar stories of the ministry of Jesus- the story of a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. It is only Luke who tells this story. As we reflect on any Lucan story it is important to keep at the back of our minds the theology of this gospel, which is "the universality of Jesus salvation". He wrote an orderly account of what Jesus did to "seek and save" all the lost people- the poor and the rich, Jews and gentiles, young and old – even the notorious sinners.

At the time of the healing of this woman, Jesus was on the journey to Jerusalem. Luke parallels Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to the Journey of the people of Israel through the desert with Moses, when they received instruction about their way of life in the Promised land. On the journey to Jerusalem – Jesus was teaching and showing his disciples the way of life in the realm/Kingdom of God. It is on this journey that His opposition intensified, as it became clear to his opponents that he was challenging all they thought they knew about God. Knowing his mission, Jesus continued to teach and live out the values of the Kingdom.

The setting of the story of the healing of this woman is a Sabbath day and a synagogue- a place of worship on a day of worship. As usual in Biblical stories, no details are given about the woman in the story, no name. All Luke tells us is that she was bent over- she could not stand straight. She had not been born like this. Something happened to her. Was it arthritis or osteoporosis? Since Luke was a doctor he should have called the disease by name, but he does not. He just says "an evil spirit", or "a crippling spirit" had made her ill. Jesus says she was bound by "Satan". So we can agree that while the sickness appeared to be physical, its origin was spiritual. We can only imagine the pain and the humiliating situation this woman was going through. Her illness was not a private affair, everybody could see that she was sick. Her posture invited looks and gossip. Remember, at that time the belief of the Jews was that sickness is a sign of punishment from God. That is why the sick were despised and treated as outcasts. This woman knew what people thought of her, but she also knew and believed that God knew the truth about her. It is for that reason she kept going to the synagogue- a place of the worship of God.

Jesus is in the synagogue too and that is where he sees the woman! As Mdolomba says in the hymn we have just sung < "Kanti uYesu uyandibona"- Now the sitting arrangement in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century synagogue is explained by Wayne Meeks in his book, "From Maccabees to the Mishnah". He says

that because the Jewish worship in Jesus time was centred at the Temple in Jerusalem, the synagogues were built as simple structures, mostly with dirt floor and mud and thatch roofs. They were built in two levels. The lower level was an open space with no benches or seats- that is where women and children sat on the floor. Then you would have two or three steps taking you to the upper level. The three sides of the upper level- the front and the two sides had benches made of wood or stones where men sat. At the centre of the upper level was the seat of Moses, where the preacher/ teacher sat when preaching or praying. Many a times women could not hear what was said in the front as they were far removed from the seat of Moses.

So it is from this seat at the centre of the upper level, that Jesus sees this woman. May be because this woman was so out of shape that no one could miss her! May be because it was Jesus style to focus his eyes on those in the periphery! Whatever the reason he sees her. He stops in the middle of a sermon! I am imagining the whole synagogue was silent then!

He calls the woman from the lower level to the upper level, It must have taken her sometime to get where Jesus was! Everybody thought "No! that is the men's level, no woman should go there!

He talks to her in front of everybody! " Woman, you are released from your illness! The Greek word translated released can also be translated " set free" or send away, or dismissed. Jesus is saying the crippling spirit that caused your illness is dismissed and you are set free!

He does not stop at talking to her, He touches her! When he touched her, Luke says, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God! We are not told how she praised God- but we can only assume that she praised God in the way women can. She probably forgot that her head was covered and as she lifted her hands looking up to heaven, for the first time after 18 years, her covering fell down and her hair was seen! In the Jewish culture a woman,s uncovered hair was an offence! Whatever she did as she praised God, while it led the crowd to rejoicing with her, it angered the Synagogue ruler. Anything a free woman does irritates a crippled man!

He protested and created a scene! We know the story, we have heard it read to us!

Allow me to highlight three messages that I glean from the story.

1. This story is about the power of God to heal those who have faith in God. Note what happens in the story. The connection between God and Jesus was not known at the time. For this woman Jesus was one of the Rabbis. She probably had heard that there are people that Jesus healed. But her faith was in God. That is why when she was straightened up she does not praise Jesus- she praises God. The advancement of medicine and science has not taken from God the power to heal human ailments and suffering! We therefore cannot doubt the healing power of God even in our times. The scandal of our time however, is to see some preachers of the gospel, take the power of God to heal and make it their own. It is neither the day, the place, amount of water nor anybody's touch that will unleash the power of God to heal you and me . It is faith in God the Three in One- that will. This God can do in any place where the heart of the believer meets with the heart of God. On this particular day, at the synagogue normal worship, the heart of God met with the believing heart of the woman and she was healed. For those in this service of worship who came burdened and suffering from whatever ailment, old or new, physical or spiritual, if you believe- this might

be your day of healing. May be the message is yours today, “ Woman, Man, you are set free from your ailment!

2. This story is not just about the physical healing of the woman. If it was, Jesus could have spoken the words of healing from where he was sitting or finished what he was doing and later attended to the woman. Look at what Jesus does; He calls her from the margins to the centre. This is the story of the liberation of women! It is about Jesus, God incarnate, breaking gender barriers in the house of worship. It is about Jesus showing his disciples and all present that the wellbeing and dignity of all is more important than keeping religious and traditional rules.

In this story Jesus is giving a new meaning to the place of worship in the Kingdom of God that He was setting up. Instead of being a place of separation and rules, he transformed it into a place of restoring dignity, where God’s compassion is experienced, a place of freedom and praising God, even for those in the periphery of society. We are seeing here Jesus sanctioning the equality of human beings in the place of worship. That is why Jesus concludes the whole incident with a question, What is the Kgd of God like, What shall I compare it with? ( vs 18ff ) In his action He was sowing a seed of the Kingdom.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus broke the walls that separated people, barriers between the healthy and the sick, between the righteous and the assumed to be sinners. He ate with sinners and tax-collectors, he touched the lepers and allowed women to touch him. At the well of Jacob, he held a theological conversation with a Samaritan woman, breaking the religious , racial and gender barriers. The task of breaking barriers was completed on the cross, where Jesus conquered the power of sin and separation and reconciled God and humanity.

The characteristic of the church of Christ since the time of the Apostles, has been, being the place where all who accept Christ as Lord, are accepted without discrimination. The apostles were taught this by Christ. It was a new way of doing things , because differences and divisions have always been there between people, but because it was “the way” of the Lord the apostles insisted on it. In Paul’s explanation to the Galatian church- “ those baptised into Christ, through faith they become children of God, and the barriers are broken. “ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ”.

From Conference last year to today, the MCSA has responded to the call of the PB of celebrating 40 years of the ordination of women in our church. At Conventions, Synods and special services, women ministers have shared their various experiences of the Methodist ministry. For those who have cared to listen – these stories have had something in common- pain and humiliation. It took 160 years from the time of Barnabas Shaw to 1976, to accept in principle that the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ is to be shared by men and women. The gap between the principle and the practice has resulted in the pain and the humiliation that many women ministers have experienced. For many, the 40years past has been a time of trial and testing. They have been pushed to the lower levels or generally considered second class ministers. They have been pushed to the bent over position by the synagogue rulers of this time who are in a mission to keep the gender discrimination intact in this church. They hide behind the religious and cultural rules, traditions and usages. They speak from the place of power constructing the church of their comfort rather than the church Jesus wants.

I was recently reminded by a sister in the ministry of the comments of some Methodist male ministers who attended my induction service as a Bishop in Durban. As the service continued the statement of ridicule that was passed around was, “Niyisaphi lecawa” - “Where is this church going”. Somebody I respected laughed when I shared this and said, No, it was just a few mischievous boys playing. Boys will be boys! True, but the fact that there has not been another woman Bishop in the past 16 years indicate that the MCSA people agree with the mischievous boys-that having a woman Bishop is a church getting lost.

What then are we celebrating you ask? We are celebrating the fact that, it is Jesus who set women free! While throughout ages the church in general has failed women when it comes to gender justice, Jesus has never failed us! He has continued to call women to His ministry in all its forms. Many churches survive through the countless un-recognised ministry of women. In the MCSA there were Biblewomen and deacons, women who touched the lives of people with the compassion of Jesus. We celebrate and thank God for our pioneer women clergy who bore the brunt of being the first! We celebrate the fact that in these 40 years, inspite the obstacles and challenges the majority of women ministers have excelled in the ministry! Circuits have begun to invite women ministers, recognising the gifts they bring to the church. We celebrate the growth of the number of women clergy!

I want to encourage all women of the MCSA, ordained or not, to stand up straight! Daughter of Abraham, you have been called from the margins to the centre. Feel free to praise and serve God in the way God calls you to. For the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ and for the sake of our church, let us take the joy of the freedom that Jesus gives us and participate in the mission of God without any apology. It is Jesus who has sets us free and so we are free indeed! Let us stand up straight, engage head on and take action against gender discrimination in this our church. Clear strategies goals- open and honest questioning. Empowerment and support = no competition and PHD

For the MCSA as a whole, I believe this celebration is not just a show, but it marks a new beginning!. It says that as a church we have come of age to be church that the world is yearning for- a transforming discipleship movement. Together, men and women, let us ensure that the next 40 years is not business as usual when it comes to gender justice in this church. The next generations of women ministers will judge us if they have to deal with what we have dealt with in the last 40years

3. The third and last point. I am not unaware of the Conference Theme “ Igniting Mission, Breaking Barriers” . The PB. Is going to unpack that for us tomorrow. This story however, jumped to me as I reflected on this theme. The gender barrier is just one of the church’s area of struggle. As Methodists in this connexion, and may be throughout the world, we are plagued by all sorts of divisions. racial , tribal or ethnic, class barrier, etc. The theme of the recent World Methodist Conference in Houston was “ One” reminding Methodist everywhere that there is One God, One people, one Faith and One Lord. Throughout its history the church has failed to show the world this oneness of creation that God wills for creation.

The will of the MCSA to be “ One and undivided church” has been declared 58 years ago and yet we seem to be moving further and further apart. Our mission of spreading scriptural holiness in the lands of our connexion is stunted by our inability to practice this life of

oneness expected from the disciples of Christ. How do we go into a racially , tribalistic and sexist world and make a difference when we ourselves suffer from the same illness!

Todd Pittinsky in his book, "Crossing the Divide- Intergroup Leadership in a World of Differences". ( Collection of papers presented at the Leadership Seminar for Business people ) argues that sub-groups Or social groups are a reality for every organisation. The problem he says, is that many leaders have found it easier and have chosen to lead by dividing in order to hold on to power. The success of business in the world of differences, lies in Inter-group Leadership. I quote- " A leader must take great care to construct a super-ordinate identity that does not appear to over represent one sub-group. A leader must transcend subgroup differences and build a shared sense of "us" by focussing members on shared values, attitudes, practices and goals".

In this story Jesus is providing a clear example of Inter-group leadership for the leaders of His church to emulate. This was a Jewish man- belonging to the male –subgroup in the synagogue. Look at how he transcend his maleness in the story! He openly takes a side and defend the outcast. He focuses all the Jews on the shared identity among them! The "Us"! He says, to the synagogue ruler, this is not just any woman, this is" the daughter of Abraham-" just like you are sons of Abraham! Like you, she is a descendent and an heiress in the promises God made to Abraham. Her freedom and her wellbeing is as much a priority to God as that of the sons of Abraham. This is what touched the ruler and his followers and they were visible ashamed as they realised their mistake. ( Other examples )

The barriers amongst us as a church community- the MCSA will not be broken by us talking and lamenting about them, but they will be broken when we follow the example of Jesus, particularly those who are in leadership- I mean all leaders starting from Sunday School Teachers to Presiding Bishop! I pray for Methodist Sunday School teachers who will transcend their social groups and make Sunday school to be a place of dignity for all children be they rich or poor, black or white, Xhosa or Sotho.

May God raise in the MCSA, Lay leaders, Ministers, Bishops, Presiding Bishops who will transcend their maleness or femaleness, their whiteness or blackness, their Zuluness or Tswananess. Leaders who will be sensitive to the glaring divisions of the church and take actions to correct them. Leaders who are more concerned with justice than their safety and security. Leaders who are brave enough to correct the wrong no matter who does it. Leaders who will raise before the Methodist members shared values and a life of Oneness in Christ instead of focusing on sub-group interests. Leaders who are prepared to side with the marginalised and defend the defenceless.

The ability to transcend who we are is a spiritual matter. It happens only when one is in Christ. When one is in Christ, there is a new creation- the old is gone, the new has come! Are we the leaders who are in Christ? Do we have the leaders who are in Christ?

As we come to the table of grace let us all open our hearts to the gentle call of Jesus Christ. Even now His transforming grace is available to all. AMEN

