

Acting for peace - standing up for liberation and compassion

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 August, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by
Rev Dr Margaret Mayman and Dr Florina Xavier

Pentecost 11 C

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17; Contemporary Reading: “*The bent-over woman*” in Lynette McCredden, *Women's words: a local anthology*.

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ikH0joHiI&t=1038s>

Margaret

Jesus' encounter with that bent over woman crystallizes his challenge to religious people who prioritize rules over relationship with God and others. The gifts of God for the people of God were being limited and rationed by religious leaders who were more interested in control than in abundant life.

The Sabbath, that gift of God for restoration and balance, had become a burden that restricted healing and inclusion. Jesus broke the rules, proclaiming the gospel of freedom. Jesus saw this woman who was bent down by a physical or psychological burden and he sought her liberation.

His diagnosis was that Satan had bound her for 18 long years. I think that this was simply a way of attributing a debilitating disease to the powers of evil - in order to make it clear that disability does not come from God.

Maybe the woman's body was demonstrating the status of women in a culture in which women were property. She resorted to lurking at the edges of the synagogue worship, while elite men pondered the nature of God.

When Jesus saw her he called her over and said: *woman you are set free from your ailment*. When he laid his hands on her and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

Walter Wink, in his book “Engaging the powers”, suggests that Jesus’ action represented a revolution happening in a few short verses. In this story Jesus tries to wake people up to the kind of life that God wants for them.

According to Wink, in the midst of a highly patriarchal culture, Jesus breaks the rules.

The first is that Jesus speaks to a woman. In civilized society, Jewish men didn’t speak to women in public.

In John 4, where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, the disciples afterwards were astonished to know that he had been speaking with a woman. In speaking with the woman in our story, Jesus again rejects male restraints on women's freedom.

Number 2, he calls her to the centre of the synagogue. By placing her in the middle of the space, he challenges the notion of male monopoly on access to knowledge of God and access to God.

Rule number 3 broken: he touches her, challenging the holiness code, the code that protected men from women's uncleanness and from their sinful seductiveness.

Rule number 4 broken: he calls her a daughter of Abraham, a term not previously found in any Jewish literature. This was revolutionary in a context where it was believed that women were saved through their relationships with men. To call her a daughter of Abraham is to make her a full-fledged member of the Nation of Israel - with equal standing before God.

Rule Number 5 broken: he heals on the Sabbath, the holy day. In doing this he demonstrates God's compassion for people over ceremony and reclaims the Sabbath for the celebration of God's creativity.

And rule number 6, last but not least: he challenges the ancient belief that her illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. He asserts that she is ill, not because God willed it but because there is evil in the world.

Jesus' work of liberation created enemies. The breaking of these six cultural rules did not go unnoticed by the religious leaders.

The leader of the synagogue was disturbed by Jesus' behaviour and challenged him with the rulebook. His shock was portrayed in a witty and telling way in Glenda Skinner Noble's painting that's on the front cover of the liturgy booklet - where he is represented in a stance that echoes Munch's famous painting, *The Scream*.

Jesus responded to his accusations by revealing an understanding of God as the power of mutual relation. Jesus saw God's Will focused on people not on rules. The rules were there to help people, not to break people. In Mark chapter 2, Jesus says *the Sabbath was made for people not people for the Sabbath*.

The religious leaders pictured God as a rule maker, sinners as rule breakers - and the upright, like themselves, as rule keepers.

The religious leaders reflected the understanding that being religious was about obeying the commandments. For them, God's rules had become ends in themselves

But, for Jesus, God's chief concern was not about being obeyed, but about fullness of life for all people. God was not a rule maker but a life giver. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures - all of these are subordinate to love.

In a powerful - and life giving action, Jesus gave the bent-over woman a new sense of who she was. I think that this story is less about cure and more about relationship -with all the bent over women, with all the bent over people, young and old, in Jesus' time and in our world.

Jesus actions in this text speak to the church of today, so that we too may respond with love and compassion and a message of liberation.

I now invite for **Florina** to share some of the work that she does - for love and compassion and liberation. Florina it's wonderful to have you with us.

~~~~~

Have you ever thought about the opportunity to be Jesus? To help straighten up the bent old woman? We all have that opportunity. It's what we do with that!

Good morning and thank you all for having me here today. I'm going to read my speech. I usually don't do it, but then I said I'm going to prepare myself well and read my speech. But I'm going to go on and off so bear with me for that. So I'm happy to be here with you and share my journey.

I'm a social worker. I'm working with Act for Peace as the Return and Reintegration Advisor, - so I have this very interesting job working in Sri Lanka and in India. I am from Chennai in India, but I'm based in Colombo in Sri Lanka. My work with refugees began about 20 years ago when I was doing my masters. I look young but I am that old.

I was doing my master's thesis and decided to work on refugees, so I went into the refugee camps, did some data collection and, the last day I wanted to take a picture with a family that helped me. So, mother father 2 daughters. And those were the days when we had our roll cameras, we had to pose for pictures; I'm sure we all remember that.

So I got the whole family together and everybody was there - the mom wasn't there so then I said I want the Mom to come.

And they said no, no, it's OK, she's not going to come. We can take the picture together. No I want Mama. So one of the daughters went in to get the mother and after some time the mother came out and the daughter was still inside! So I'm like - I need all of you in the picture.

So I went in to grab the daughter and what I saw shocked me. She was sitting inside the tent in the refugee camp with her - what we call a nighty. You know in India and Sri Lanka we wear something - a long gown. It could pass off a dress actually, but it's a night dress we wear in the day - so don't ask me to explain that.

So she was sitting with that, an old one, and tears in her eyes. So, I knew what was going on. And that time I decided - that's my call in life. I need to work with refugees.

With a social work background and enough of problems in India I could be anywhere. I could be working with any kind of an issue but to be poor, to be homeless is one thing, but to be a refugee, poor, and homeless is definitely something else.

Conflict and violence is no longer what we saw on television. It is now part of our lives. Apart from making us distraught, violence creates a sense of dissociation - while life is no longer peaceful and refugees are born.

When the war started in Sri Lanka in 1983 many of the Sri Lankans had to flee to different parts of the world. The most poor were the vulnerable who came to India by boats. Even today India has, in the southern part of India, in Tamil Nadu we have 107 refugee camps with 60,000 refugees living in the camps. And we have another 30,000 living outside of the camps.

The refugees have lived in India for more than 30 years and some of them have been born in India. Many of the refugee families are doing well - they have jobs, they go to school, they have health care. India seems to be like home, but they are refugees. They have no citizenship, no voting rights, no future. Many of them long to return but return to what? To massacre and fear and insecurity.

And this is what a refugee thinks of, because when they left home this was what life was. And today they have decided return. Its 10 years since the war ended. May 2009 was the end of war. The government has invited them (the Sri Lankan government) has openly invited refugees to come back to Sri Lanka. And yet the trust needs to be built.

It is a difficult journey. What do you tell people who are born in India who lived all their lives in India? What do you tell them about Sri Lanka? The beautiful country, the beaches and the opportunities you might have? How do you approach a question of statelessness, citizenship and the opportunities you might have in Sri Lanka - when you are there.

Building bridges, engaging people with what they could expect upon return, helping refugees see the larger picture, and helping returning refugees embracing their land is some of what I do.

Resilience is the middle name of refugees. In 2002, the government of Sri Lanka signed a cease fire agreement with the militant group, so many of them returned to Sri Lanka in 2002-03 - and returned to what? To tsunami in 2004. So resilience is the middle name and they keep coming back. They keep wanting the hope, they keep coming back with the energy.

One of the refugee women I met (I met many) but one of them once told me - she said *it's better to die in war than to live and survive the trauma.*

Today, the story, the contemporary reading, it super-inspired me. I mean, to think that this is what we are doing. We are trying, trying our best - whether it's the Sabbath or any day. Every day we are trying hard to be able to come out courageously and say "stand up". Because we know we have the power, but we are just afraid. We are scared and we are scared for many reasons. We are scared to say it, but we are scared whether they will rise up.

And this is what each of you are contributing towards - and Act for Peace is doing just this. Act for Peace is breaking the rules, is being courageous, is revolutionizing, because Act for Peace is working with organizations - grassroots organizations. Act for Peace partners with an Indian Sri Lanka grassroots organization led by refugees. When you usually work with the big organizations, you know, you don't want to get caught in this small little organizations. But Act for Peace is doing just that. Revolutionizing the work. Working with refugees organization that is led by refugees and empowering them.

For the last 35 years, Act for Peace has been investing in this organization, building their courage so much that today this organization is negotiating with governments. Is talking to the Indian in Sri Lankan governments. So the process that we are working is to bring refugees back from India to Sri Lanka, but with both the governments agreeing. Preparing people in the camps in India for return, telling them what it is that they will expect when they go back. And when they return to Sri Lanka, helping them reintegrate their lives, build their lives, help with livelihood, education, health different things.

Act for Peace is in collaboration with OfERR (Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation) in India. I'm just going to read this part, just to make clear. "Act for Peace in collaboration with OfERR in India and OfERR Ceylon, in Sri Lanka, helps break this cycle of trauma. They help refugees make an informed decision, thus preparing them for return and also help to reintegrate returning refugees."

It was 35 years ago when Act for Peace recognized OfERR as a refugee led organization and helped to empower them. OfERR is now taking on the challenge of returning and reintegrating refugees. Advocacy with governments is part of what OfERR does, talking with the Government of India, Government of Sri Lanka for a bilateral agreement on return. It's an ongoing process.

In a few months you may hear in the papers that the refugees are going to take the seaway transport - not to Australia - to Sri Lanka. And that is something that Act for Peace is strongly doing, is helping people go back home. Go back to where they are from. And that's really important because they do want to go back.

Each of your contributions in different ways: your prayers, your thoughts, your conversations your advocacy, your money - everything contributes towards people straightening up. People being able to stand up.

And that's why I said this is your opportunity to be Jesus!

To be safe. To say yes, you can stand up.

Every awareness program we conduct, every health worker that meets with a patient, every person who finds a job when they return to Sri Lanka, and every person who is able to breathe easy because they are able to stand straight - come to you with gratitude. And I bring that gratitude from the refugees and their attorneys.

I also want to share the hope that they have in making this dream come true. The refugees and returnees are not just returning home, they are reintegrating. They are paving way for the refugee model. They are telling the world that this is possible. You often hear this grim story of refugees. But I'm not talking about that group of refugees. I'm talking about a group of refugees who, ever since they came to India have been talking about return. Have been talking about nation building. Have been talking about "when do we go back home and how do we make things better for our country".

They are being clear the refugees can go home and be happy. It is not easy. They struggle - and some even decide to return to India. However the support that they have from others who have returned earlier through a systematic program which is supported by Act for Peace. Many of them regained their lives and live the dream.

I've been in this field for the last 20 years and I have been with them in their sorrow and their sickness, but hope is what they stand for. We are here in a very crucial time when everything seems normal. War is over people are returning.

And yet there is a long way to go. This is when we need to step up. To ensure that lives back home in Sri Lanka are stabilized. Today they are thinking of returning and rebuilding their lives. It is possible because of your support.

I want to thank you again for your thoughtfulness and love in supporting Act for Peace. And I implore and I ask you to keep giving to this noble cause. Remember that we are saving one life at a time and this is your opportunity to be Jesus.

Thank you very much.



**Andy Corkill** – Relationship Fundraising Manager, Act for Peace

Friends, I kind of feel like I don't even need to get up and say anything after that. That's just one story from one of our programs. And it's so powerful when you hear about the work that's being done on the ground, that's changing lives. I just wanted to say thank you.

It's amazing to consider that all of this work has been made possible for over 70 years through the Christmas Bowl. That's what most people know Act for Peace is – for our Christmas Appeal which is the Christmas Bowl.

It came from a very humble simple idea of Frank Byatt. He put an empty bowl on his Christmas table and he asked his family and friends to consider what they thought the value of the meal had been and to put that in. That simple humble act has resonated over churches, particularly through the Uniting Church. But ecumenically, we have thousands of churches across over 20 denominations who support the Christmas Bowl. That simple idea has inspired thousands of individuals.

And while Act for Peace has turned into a much more robust and sophisticated organization over those 70 years, at its core it remains as what it was - which is a group of good people motivated by love, grounded in the Gospel, doing what we can to create a safer and more dignified and just life for people in need. So again thank you.

And I'm going to break the rules and I'm going to actually say: please continue to support Christmas Bowl and Act for Peace in whatever ways you can.

The first way is through prayer. Please pray for the people that we serve, for our staff like Florina, who are in the field. For Janet, our C.E.O. who's snaking up in the back there. She does an incredible job and she actually gets out to the field as well and sees some of the programs. People end up being in dangerous situations. Please uphold them in your prayers

We have faithful and generous volunteers. They come into the office, they work in back rooms of congregations, they print out forms, they go to the bank, they collect donations, they hand out envelopes, stuff things for us. Our work wouldn't happen without that crew of thousands of volunteers across the country.

Now I want you to feel free to break a rule. Get your phone out. Look up Act for Peace on Facebook. Look up the Christmas Bowl. Like us, share the content. It's actually really good to do that it does help an awful lot. I see a couple of bits of movement, so if you feel it's OK, do it at home or over morning tea. But if you can do that online that actually does make a huge difference.

And the other one if you can support financially, please do. When you give, you'll be supporting incredible work that's life transforming. Whatever you give and however you support, thank you. When you support the Christmas Bowl and when you support Act for Peace, you are sharing God's love in really practical ways and you're helping your neighbour. You're, bringing safety, justice and dignity to people around the world who are in desperate need.

Thank you for your past support and I pray that you will continue it in the future.