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Called to lament injustice and prophesy equality, justice, peace and healing for all – Honoring Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge –

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CALLED TO LAMENT INJUSTICE AND PROPHECY EQUALITY, JUSTICE, PEACE AND HEALING FOR ALL – HONORING REV. DR. NYAMBURA NJOROGE –

Fulata Lusungu Moyo

Introduction

“My dear sister, our God does not eat ugali. Even when she seems silent, she still hears. I do not know why he is not speaking to you right now, but I am trusting with you that when the right time comes, we will be able to hear what she has to say on this matter Let us not grow weary of walking together and accompanying each other!”

This is one of the typical conversations during long walks taken with my Circle sister, Rev Dr Nyambura Njoroge in this beautiful Swiss city of Geneva. Our lamentations as concerned African womanist theologians have been full of deep theological reflections, ethical musings, activist raging as mothers, sisters, aunts and African daughters. They have always emerged from the reality of African women’s resilience and agency for transformation. Together, we have become:

Run sisters, pregnant with passion for justice
Mothers who transform our pain into prophecies for change
Our lament loud and clear
Challenging the ecumenical mediocracy
How many tears have we cried?
How many tears do we still cry?
You of great faith –
Will they listen and break the silence with you?
Yes, sexual and gender-based violence is an injustice!
The seed to HIV, an incubator for AIDS
It is about abuse of power, not so much about sex
For sex is about mutuality and being-at-one-ment, a beautiful gift from
God.
... Sssh...sssh ... sssh...sssh.....
Sssh! What? Mental health? Why talk about such the unspeakable?
Mental health is real – it is a killer –let’s break the silence around it!
Destroy its sting nurtured by the conspiracy of silence

Can't you see and hear the groans of so many struggling with it?
 It has no gender, no race, no class, no age, nor creed
 Whether rich or poor, it envelops
 It drowns its victims into bottomless holes of hopelessness and drowning
 anxiety
 Yet many people vow to silence
 Run sisters, we refuse to be silent about this silent killer
 Break the silence, break it, and together lets birth hope beyond the pits of
 hopelessness!

This narrative is for the Sapphire Jubilee celebration for Nyambura, the daughter of a midwife and a granddaughter of a single mother who refused to bow to patriarchal suppression and silencing through the expectation of marriage and chose to raise her children as a single mother. It uses the story of Hagar as a sexual slave exploited by Abram through the agency of Sarai, her mistress and owner (Genesis 16:1-6, 21). I read this biblical narrative as an African eco-womanist theologian and ethicist using the lens of daring activism for gender justice and peace with no sexual and gender-based violence. The focus is on women as agents of resistance and transformation for gender justice and peace. The story of Hagar is transposed with the story of my own mother, Ellina Nyaphakati, a two-times-child bride.

These are narratives of sexual and gender-based violence that place the story of Hagar as part of the account of the commoditisation of girls' (women's) bodies in human trafficking and sexual enslavement. For this latter placement, the story of the trafficking of Indian girls by the church's mechanisms, captured in the November 2018 news quoted below, brings Hagar's story to the present realities, thus making the past present, in this continuum of the often-normalised violation of girls and women's rights. With these narratives of the 'unspeakable', I will use the concept of 'straight-talking' as an important prophetic gift, though often disparaged in contexts where justice and peace remain rhetorical – because it is often easier to yield to the temptation of political correctness that safeguards the fetishism of power, domination and exploitation.

Lamentation as prophetic activism

Lament is a demonstrative, strong, and corporate expression of deep grief, pain, sorrow, and regret. Lament and repentance deal with issues of the heart. They pave way for outer change. Lament is a personal and corporate

response to many things: evil, sin, death, harm, discrimination, inequality, racism, sexism, colonization, oppression, and injustice. It is about mourning the painful, shameful, or sorrowful situation, about confessing sin and complicity and sorrow, about calling God to intervene and to change the situation lament is about offering thanksgiving and praise to God, knowing that God will intervene and bring change, hope, and restoration (Ji-Sun Kim & Hill, 2018: 43).

According to Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill, lament is both an expression of regret, a mourning for the past as well as the move towards repentance, justice and transformed life. Balu (Charles) Savarikannu (2018), situating his reflections within the biblical laments of Jeremiah, deals with the questions of whether Jeremiah's anger and grief are a representation of God and the prophet's community. He quotes McConville's argument that Prophet Jeremiah's laments are a genuine expression of the prophet's life and experience, as well as being a part of his prophetic vocation. For, "in the laments one sees the prophet's identification with the plan and purpose of God for the nations. The prophet does not lose his identity when he becomes a paradigm for the suffering of the people and for the suffering of God" (Savarikannu, 2018:9).

Like Walter Brueggemann, one can mourn the loss of lament as a common and embraced "form of speech and faith" within the ecumenical movement. When it comes to confronting and redressing abuses, wrongs and inequalities, including those expressed in gender, sexual and racial injustice in the practices and witness of the ecumenical circles, the language of lamentation is often resisted. It is as if unity has to be achieved even if it is at the sacrificial altar of justice and the richness of diversity. Often those who dare to be prophetic in denouncing such cheap conceptions of oikoumene are stigmatised against as 'trouble causers'. The use of storytelling often helps to create a safe enough space for ecumenical conversations involving difficult issues that would otherwise fall in the ecumenical purview of 'taboo' discourse.

Breaking the silence: The church, human trafficking and rape

The News Minute¹ of Sunday, November 04, 2018 told a difficult story about the church's conspiracy of and to silence and its involvement in the

¹ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/girls-sold-european-churches-bishop-franco-case-keralas-nun-story-91054>

commoditisation of girls' and women's bodies for money, cheap labour and sexual exploitation. The following is an excerpt of the appalling narrative:

Nearly half a century ago, Father Cyriac Puthenpurackal, who was in charge of an independent diocese in Ettumanoor in Kottayam district, was accused of “exporting” more than 800 young Catholic girls from Kerala (India) to Germany in what came to be known as the “nun-running” scandal of the 1960s and early 70s. The girls, who mostly came from poor (and illiterate) families, were apparently under the impression that they were going to be trained as nurses or teachers; but they actually landed up doing domestic work in the (Catholic) convents of Germany. ... Only after they reached Germany did they realise they had been lured under false pretences, and that the German convents had actually paid money to get them over to do manual work. The money went into the pockets of the priests, and the families did not even know they had sold their daughters. ... The girls came from a village in Kottayam. ... They trusted the Father implicitly when he said they would be trained abroad, and would get good jobs when they returned. ... Their passports were confiscated when they landed, and they were treated like bonded labour (just like nuns are treated). ... Nuns in Kerala are not treated on par with the priests. When they enter the convent as brides of Jesus, they are expected to pay a dowry to the church. ... Many of them work as teachers or nurses in the institutions run by the church. The salaries they get are confiscated by the Motherhouse. While their living expenses are taken care of, they have no spending money, and many of them depend on their visiting relatives to give them a little extra money. ... The convent has a kind of stranglehold on the nuns as years of living inside the cloister makes them unprepared to face the outside world. Also, since the discipline of obedience is drilled into them, they cannot escape the clutches of powerful Bishops, Priests and Mother Superiors who could turn out to be predatory. ... In 2009, Sister Jesme, who had spent more than 30 years as a nun, left the convent. After she came out, she wrote a book called “*Amen*”, about the oppression nuns face within the convent. Writing from her own personal experiences, she described sexual misconduct on the part of priests as well as nuns. She said she was sexually harassed by a Mother Superior of a convent. She described how senior priests preyed on novices. ... Sister Jesme's book caused a furore and senior Church officials dismissed it as a “book of trivialities.” Even her family abandoned her. ... The convent turned her out without any money though she had served them for thirty years. She was labelled a prostitute by some Church officials. ... The nuns are now learning to speak for themselves and ask for justice.

This story is not uncommon, especially within the cultural shift of breaking the silence around sexual and gender-based violence. Within the ecclesial spaces, breaking this kind of silence has had its own challenges. The fact that the discourse around the Roman Catholic child sexual abuse cases has almost monopolised the media has sometimes caused the simplistic reduction of such abuses of power to sexual deprivation that vows of celibacy imply. How can one argue that the Roman Catholic priests that are allegedly connected to paedophilia and other forms of sexual violence do so because their vow of celibacy denies them sexual expressions of love? What then would be the explanation for those sexual abuses perpetrated by pastors, priests and other religious leaders whose religious call does not involve the vow of celibacy?

Over centuries, pastors and religious leaders have sexually preyed on those that they have power over – the vulnerable and trusting! For sexual violence has more to do with power abuse and exploitation rather than deep sexual connection as a holy and beautiful gift of God. So, breaking the silence against such abuses of power is crucial, but it has to be done in ways that can lead to repentant, transformative and restorative justice. Storytelling can be therapeutic in a context where injustice and violence are lamented as sin that a just God despises. Sister Jesme’s experience of rejection and derogatory naming is an example of the cost of courageously breaking the silence around sexual and gender-based violence. It takes the empowered prophetic voices such as Sister Jesme, the ‘straight-talkers’ to courageously acknowledge such exploitative blasphemy, and call the community to acknowledge and share the knowledge of such violations so as to lead to repentance and transformation. This can then lead to the flow of justice and peace as important streams of the gospel of life in all its fullness for all.

In March, 2011 when the Archbishop of Canterbury launched the Tearfund research report *Silent No More*², the World Council of Churches (WCC) was represented by the programme executive for Women in Church and Society (currently known as Just Community of Wo/Men³).

² <https://www.wewillspeakout.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Silent-no-more-FI-NAL.pdf>.

³ I use Wo/Men (S/He, Fe/Male) as gender inclusive terminologies that defy the binaries of women and men, She/He, female and males to inclusively talk about humanity in all its diverse gender identities. For a richer discussion on this, see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender, and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge, Feminist Studies in Religion Books, 2016).

The discussions that followed affirmed the urgent need for churches to be part of the prophetic movement of breaking the silence that often has nurtured sexual and gender-based violence in church and society. This launch also led to the establishment of the We Will Speak Out (WWSO)⁴ coalition. The *Silent No More* report was an honest representation of how churches have responded to sexual violence. “In many cases the church has remained silent, where the church has spoken out, it has often led to increased stigma towards survivors. If the church is to fulfill its mandate to protect and serve the vulnerable, it now has to rise to that challenge. This is a challenge for the church not just in Africa but throughout the world, for sexual violence is present everywhere.” (Silent No More, 2011:7, 9). In a nutshell, this report laments the churches’ role in perpetuating a culture of silence and its failure to respond to the sexual and gender-based violence. It also makes headways in suggesting how the ecclesial untapped potential can be released to contribute to the prevention of sexual violence and the reduction of its impact.

It would not be far-fetched to argue that the #MeToo campaign was one of the midwives that contributed to the nativity of the WWSO in 2011. The Anglican Communion could see the warning writings on the walls of its sanctuary, even though many sexual abuse scandals were not yet out. The #MeToo campaign, which was birthed by Tarana Burke⁵ as early as 2006 was not as vibrant then as it has become recently. Yet the move to break the silence had begun and the church needed to do a serious stocktaking within its communities and structures regarding its contribution and response to sexual violence. The church had to courageously acknowledge its unfortunate role as both perpetrator as well as enabler of the culture of sexual and gender-based violence. It had to start telling its story.

As part of the church that is taking baby steps in breaking the silence, let me tell you a story of child-marriage, one of the major expressions of sexual and gender-based violence.

⁴ <https://www.wewillsspeakout.org/resource-type/updates/>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/arts/tarana-burke-metoo-anniversary.html> [accessed 10/05/2019].

Sarai and Hagar, Nyajere and NyaPhakati – Child marriage

From her shared stories of childhood, my mother Elina NyaPhakati, a baptised and committed member of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Livingstonia Synod, must have been born in 1920/21. Since her father had gone to work in the mines in South Africa as part of the TEBA⁶ agreement, her grandmother who took her in did not send her to missionary school, except for the first three classes of primary education. She could hardly read nor write in her mother tongue of Ngoni-Tumbuka. To run away from dehumanising poverty, she eloped with her first young love at 13 years old. When her comparatively young husband went to join mine work so as to gain enough resources before building a family with my mother, his cruel uncle⁷ forced my mother to run away, back to her family. In the name of family honour, her older brother subjected my mother to domestic violence. The frequent beating and abusive words continued and played the role of convincing my mother to 'accept' my father's insistent proposal for marriage. She was 15/16 when she married my 39/40-year-old father⁸ as his third wife⁹. My father wanted a younger wife who could give him more male children after both his first and second wife gave him two daughters and only one son. As a third wife she was given to the custody of his second wife so as to serve her demands. In 1937 she conceived a baby boy but ended in miscarriage when her mistress and co-wife employed someone to physically abuse her. With advice

⁶ For details on the <https://www.uj.ac.za/library/informationresources/special-collections/Documents/TEBA%20History.pdf>; https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/ed_protect/protrav/migrant/documents/presentation/wcms_422411.pdf [accessed on 13/05/2019].

⁷ Her husband known by his family name, Ncumayo, was raised by his mother's family in a patrilineal family system. This means that his mother did not marry his father, so she was a single mother still living in her village of birth. It is not clear whether when Ncumayo married my mother as his child-bride his mother was still in the village or not.

⁸ My father was a member of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian but because of being polygamous he was not allowed to participate in full communion, including not partaking of the Holy Communion. So, he decided to found an independent church known as the *African Abraham Church* and he remained its overseer and senior pastor until his death in August 1989. My stepbrother, Wilnerd Mbano was supposed to take over, but the members of the church decided to transfer the headship to another family away from the Mbano family. This church accepted polygamy based on the teaching that Abraham, the father of Christianity through its Jewish roots, was polygamous. Otherwise, it is trinitarian like the reformed theological basis from which it broke.

⁹ My father's first wife was suffering from post-partum depression and therefore was no longer part of my father's household soon after my mother joined the household.

from her, my mother was banished from his household as a murderer of his unborn son.

Similarly, Hagar must have been quite young when she was trafficked from Egypt, enslaved and owned as property. Reduced to being a possession, Hagar was forced to be a child 'bride' to a man much older than her own father, so as to rescue her mistress, Sarai, from childlessness. When she conceived, she was then accused of despising her mistress. She fled from her angry mistress only to be returned by God's Angel back to enslavement. However, fourteen years later when her mistress had her own son in her old age, Hagar and Ishmael (God hears) were banished.

The God Who Sees and Hears

Probably, Hagar, like my mother, Elina, might have found herself expecting a child at a teen age as a concubine or second wife of a man much older than her – probably the age of her own father. When Hagar and my mother were banished and my mother was threatened to be speared by my father, it was the sense of God seeing what they were going through and hearing their cry that kept them sane amidst so much suffering. Banished and alone in their wilderness of pain and suffering, they were able to meet the God who sees/hears and heals away from the women who had power over them! Like Sarai, the enslaving mistress who did not offer accompaniment to Hagar, so did NyaJere not accompany my mother towards healing. My mother was 'trafficked' and 'enslaved' at 15/16 by my father and his wife who gained custodianship over her, even though in her (my mother's) mind she convinced herself that it was her choice to go with him and submit to NyaJere's 'ownership'.

According to the International Research Center for Women (IRCW), one third of girls in the so-called developing world are married before the age of 18 and one in nine girls are married before the age of 15. If present trends continue, 150 million girls will be married before their eighteenth birthday over the next decade. Girls living in poor households are more likely to marry before the age of eighteen than girls in higher income households. Girls with higher levels of schooling are less likely to marry as children. Girls who marry before the age of eighteen are more likely to experience "domestic" violence. A variety of religions, including Christianity, are associated with child marriage in different countries throughout the world.

Even though Hagar’s narrative comes from 2000 BCE, juxtaposing her story with my mother’s helps to bring this ancient story close to home in the present. The misconception that heterosexual marriage is what God wills for every girl and woman has meant that questions of age and even ethical principles that characterise such marriages have not been prioritised, except if such are necessary to the advantage of the man marrying such a girl or woman. Such misconceptions are sustained by an understanding of a god, who himself is an imperialist patriarch and enslaver. A god who commanded total submission of wives to husbands, and commanded husbands to love their wives like a slave owner loves his human property. This understanding was based on colonial, imperial and enslaving readings of texts such as Ephesians 5: 22-26:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word¹⁰

Why is it that this kind of reading does not include verse 21: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”? Such a concept of God cannot help liberate girls and women from the violations and enslavement of child 'marriage'.

Returning to the narrative of Genesis 16: 1-6, some of the Contextual Bible Study questions that can help bring liberation for the wo/men readers can include the following: How does the modern sexual trafficking violations embody such a story? How do family realities of poverty, lack of education and misconception of “being owned” contribute to the vulnerability of girls? What hermeneutical tools can transform such sacred texts into resources for gender justice and peace with zero tolerance for violence against women and girls? Apart from the theology of hope enshrined in personal revelations of God, what hermeneutical tool can be used so that such hope also spurs violated girls, women and their religious communities to actively be agents of their own transformation? What role do older women in the lives of these girls play? What resources can be used for the

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion on Ephesians 5:21-33, see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Commentary, Volume 50: Ephesians*, (Collegeville/ Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2018: 83-122), Fulata L. Moyo, “Reading Ephesians 5:21-26 as an African”, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Commentary*, 101-102.

accompaniment of the violated girls and women so as to address the trauma caused by their experiences of exploitation? What resources do churches have that can help call perpetrators to the acknowledgement of their sin, and lead them to repentance and transformation?

For the World Council of Churches' (WCC) initiatives aimed at addressing sexual and gender-based violence, it has been the reading of such sacred texts using the Contextual Bible Study methodology gender justice (feminist/womanist) hermeneutics that has liberated communities to break the silence around such taboo issues. These readings have been a strategy within the advocacy processes of awareness raising and policy making, including the Transformative Masculinities and Femininities process, the gender training for religious communities to be able to participate in holding their governments accountable to the defence of women's rights by submitting faith based organisation (civil society) reports regarding existing international mechanisms, including treaty bodies like the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) and Universal Periodical Review (UPR), as well as other UN mechanisms with country plan of actions to ensure gender perspectives to peace-building resolutions, such as UNSCR 1325 (resolution on Women, Peace and Security). WCC has also pioneered the Thursdays in Black campaign for a world without rape and violence, which has become the heartbeat of the ecumenical movement's activism against sexual and gender-based violence. Rev Dr Nyambura Njoroge has been one of the pioneers of all these above interventions for gender justice, human dignity and peace with no sexual and gender-based violence. She has been a straight-talking prophet! I lift up my breasts in an ancient ritual of blessings that my distant relatives the Lozi women of Zambia used and hopefully they still use.

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