



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

16 Days of Activism against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Orange the World: “Fund, Prevent, Respond, Collect”

Contextual Bible studies

Introducing the Bible Studies:

These bible studies are meant to be theological and pastoral tools to encourage reflection and action among LWF member churches on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence. They are shaped to bridge biblical texts and contemporary contexts, by inviting reflection on some of the major challenges that churches face in responding to sexual and gender-based violence. The selection of texts offers not only a lens to analyze various dimensions of sexual and gender-based violence, but also to stimulate thinking on meaningful action. Member churches can adapt these bible studies at any point in the 16 days of activism, in response to the questions, challenges and needs they face, and use them as tools of advocacy and accompaniment, which can move communities towards action for gender justice and prevention of violence.

Bible Study 1 – Lamentation of Tamar – 2 Samuel 13:1-21

Context:

This passage is usually titled “the rape of Tamar”, but I would like to retitle it as “Lamentation of Tamar”. Tamar is raped by her half-brother Amnon. It is one of the passages in the Bible dealing with violence against women that takes place in the context of intimate relationships, within spaces that are often considered safe. It teaches us how the danger to women often does not come from outsiders, but can also come from insiders – people whom we trust. It also highlights the dilemmas people face when responding to abuse that takes place within familial spaces and relationships.

Guiding question:

- Is sexual abuse that takes place within families a taboo issue in your context / churches?

Background of the text:

Most of the abuses against children and vulnerable groups take place in the 'circles of trust'. In this biblical passage, Amnon gains the trust of his half-sister Tamar, invites her to his home and abuses her.

The story also highlights the problem of toxic masculinities. When Jonadab, Amnon's 'crafty' friend and cousin, hears the reason for Amnon's sadness he suggests the deceitful idea of luring Tamar to Amnon's house with the intention of taking advantage of her. This prompts us to reflect on the role of friendships in perpetuating toxic masculinities, which see women as objects that can be taken by force or deceit.

The tragedy of Tamar's story is that she is the lone voice lamenting and protesting her rape publicly. She puts ashes on her head, tears the long robe that she was wearing; puts her hand on her head, and goes away, crying loudly (v.19). This is completely different from the responses of Absalom, her brother, and David, her father. Absalom is angry with Amnon, but asks his sister Tamar to "keep quiet for now" (v.20) before he takes matters into his own hands. "Keep quiet" is a common response that many women, who have been sexually abused, face from those close to them. The social stigma surrounding rape is so strong that often the victims are silenced, even by those who love them. King David is angry on hearing what happened to Tamar, but the text shows him as doing nothing about it. He remains almost a silent spectator – who refuses to challenge his firstborn son on his misdeeds.

Today as we reflect on responding to gender-based violence, one thing we need to confront as churches is the silence and stigma that surrounds gender-based violence. We need to break this tyranny and conspiracy of silence and ensure that the cries of lament and protest of the survivors of gender-based violence are heard and addressed appropriately. Only then can we make space for justice and healing for the survivors of sexual violence in our midst.

Question to ponder:

- How can our churches and communities ensure justice for those who have survived sexual violence?

Bible Study 2 – Jesus' Response towards Violence – John 8:1-11

Context:

What were you wearing? What were you doing at that time of the night? Why were you there? All these are common questions that women who have experienced rape get asked - not just by common people, but even in courts. In a patriarchal society, there is still a strong underlying notion that

rape and sexual assault might be the consequence of a woman's actions and attitudes. 'Victim-blaming' in cases of rape is a common practice in many societies. Because of this, men who have been accused of assault can get away scot-free, while the woman is left alone to bear the double burden – of sexual assault, as well as moral assault.

Guiding questions:

- To what extent is 'victim-blaming' a part of the 'rape culture' in your context?
- Do you know of instances and ways in which patriarchal society takes on itself the task of policing women's bodies and sexuality?

Background of the text:

Though this passage is about adultery and not rape, there is one conspicuous detail which is important to take note of. Though it takes two to commit an adultery – in this story it is only the woman who stands accused. The man is missing from the accusation. The patriarchal structures and culture seem to have enabled him to walk out of the situation, while the woman stands accused by a mob that has (literally) taken judgement into its own hands – by preparing to stone her.

Jesus resolutely resists buying into this culture. As the mob tries to draw him into passing a judgement on the woman – who, by mob trial has been found guilty - Jesus turns the tables against the mob and helps them to reflect on their own complicity in sin. In a world of sexual and gender-based violence – where misogyny, mob violence and media-trials throw stones of doubt, blame and hate at women - what would be the implications of Jesus's words "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"?

Many among us might rightly think that we haven't been directly involved in sexual and gender-based violence against women. However, if we reflect on our silence and inaction in the face of the prevailing patriarchal culture that sanctions violence against women in many forms, we realize that we are very much part of the problem and "our hands are unclean and our hearts are unprepared" to follow Christ.

In this passage, Jesus helps us to see the social dimension of sin – about how we as human beings are part of structures and cultures that perpetuate sin. This passage also draws attention to the problem of making scapegoats of the vulnerable – the 'sinned against'. As we think about prevention of violence against women, we need a cultural shift – a shift from a culture of accusation that points fingers at woman to a culture of introspection that reaches out to remove the log from our own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5).

Questions to ponder:

- How do we as churches resist the double standards that prevail against women when it comes to sexual violence?
- What steps need to be taken to increase consciousness of one's complicity in structures that unleash violence against women's bodies?
- How do we move away from being part of the mob to becoming part of the Jesus movement?

Bible Study 3 – Advocating for Justice – Matthew 15:21-28

Context:

We live in a global context where there is a tendency to marginalize certain concerns, as being less of a priority than others. Gender-based violence has been an issue met with much silence and inaction by those in power, by those making decisions within churches and the wider society.

Guiding question:

- Is sexual and gender-based violence addressed as a priority issue in your own context? What does it take to make this a priority issue?

Background of the text:

The Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus is the story of a lone woman's persistence in getting justice and healing for her daughter. Though the bible itself does not give a name for her, some later sources, from the 3rd and 4th Century known as the Pseudo Clementine homilies, identify the Canaanite woman as Justa.

In pleading for her daughter's healing, Justa crosses several boundaries. She crosses the boundary of speech, space, acceptable female behavior and cultural limitations by directly addressing a foreign male with a loud voice in public – all of which may be considered inappropriate behavior. She is considered an inconvenience by the apostles.

It is important that Justa's persistence is recognized as faith by Jesus. Matthew even puts the liturgical phrase used by the early Christian community, 'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David' on Justa's lips to communicate the idea that her cries for help were also acts of prayer. Jesus' affirmation of this action as faith recognizes her female power which was able to overcome extraordinary obstacles.

Many interpreters have found the passage to be a challenging one to understand and justify the behavior of Jesus. Initially Jesus seems non-

responsive to the woman. Later his reaction is rude and shocking, especially when he refers to the woman and her daughter as dogs. However, what comes across strongly in the text is Jesus's willingness to change his position after hearing the words of the Canaanite woman. Jesus, who begins the scene with the assumption that his primary preference is for the Jews first and the Gentiles only, later, ends the scene with the strong recognition that the kingdom ought to have space for people outside his own preferences, right now and not in some distant future.

Some biblical scholars have spoken of Justa's ministry to Jesus alongside Jesus' ministry to her. They identify Justa as one who taught Jesus to become a boundary crosser. It is this response of Jesus, listening to a foreign woman and acting on her words, that holds out a challenge to those who wield power and influence to facilitate justice in our world and in the church today – and to make this an immediate priority.

Questions to ponder:

- To what extent are our leaders transformed by the voices from the margins?
- To what extent do they let the Canaanite women of today challenge them to rethink their priorities and preferences?

Bible Study 4 – Advocating for Peace – 1 Samuel 25:1-35

Context:

This bible study focuses on the broad theme of preventing violence. Given that women and children are the most affected in any conflict situation, it focuses on the actions of a woman, Abigail, in preventing violence. This is an unusual biblical text where we find a woman, who, first of all, is named and second, plays an active role in diffusing a potentially violent situation. This is in contrast with other biblical texts where women are presented as victims of violence and conflict.

Guiding questions:

- What/who is the cause of the conflict in the text? Why?
- Do you see the actions of Nabal and David as examples of male leaders trying to address an issue by using violence?
- How does Abigail transform the situation from potential conflict to peaceful co-existence? What are Abigail's strategies?
- How can this story be useful in preventing violence in conflict situations in our circles?

Background of the text:

Abigail is the pivotal character in this text. She is introduced as an intelligent and beautiful woman (v.3). Nabal is introduced in terms of his ancestry and possessions. His love for possessions makes him enter into conflict with David.

In this context Abigail emerges as a peacemaker. In her conflict-prevention she listens to the margins (vs.14-17). She acts on the words of a young servant.

Furthermore, she uses what are called 'hidden transcripts' of subversion. Abigail adopts a strategy that is adopted by women across the world to diffuse situations of conflict. This strategy is called 'weapons of the weak' by James Scott. What looks like a culture of silence and of accommodation may actually be a strategy that vulnerable and oppressed people 'practice and perform in order to survive, while they wait for an opportunity to transform their reality'. Looking at it from the outside, this strategy can be problematic as it seems to reinforce hierarchies and discrimination. However, those who use these strategies use them as a temporary means of achieving more permanent solutions to conflict and violence.

We see Abigail employing this strategy. Alice Bach notes: "throughout her speech, Abigail continues to emphasize a power hierarchy, repeatedly calling David 'Lord' (*adoni*) and herself 'servant' (*amatekahhiphateka*). While her actions show that she is accustomed to controlling situations, her words assure David that she is handing power over to him. Her deference to the landless pauper underscores David's position as prince in disguise.

Questions to ponder:

- In her conflict prevention, Abigail appeals to David's morality and reason. She holds him ethically accountable – urging him not to have "on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed" (v.31).
- How does this text speak to our respective contexts?
- Do our strategies for preventing gender-based violence hold the perpetrators morally accountable?