



In a Different Image

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No matter how much I try to ignore it, minimize or overlook it, it manages to pop out of nowhere, sometimes when and where I least expect: the persistent reminder that I am, “just a woman.” How often have I heard that phrase from some man who felt I, or some other female, was getting too big for my boots! Take for instance the day I was driving to work in my new Toyota Sienna. On the corner of the road about 6 km (3.73 mi) to my office I stopped to give a colleague a lift; he was by far my junior in rank. It was shortly after the outbreak of violence in Jos, and there were security checkpoints everywhere. The soldier manning the first one we got to wouldn’t even look me in the eye or acknowledge my cheery, “Good morning.” Looking straight across at my passenger, he bellowed in military mantra, “Morning Sir!”

What!? I glared at him in disbelief. He merely marched round the back of the car to the other side peering through the tinted windows, looked straight at the man in my car and said, “Ride on sir.” I bit my tongue and almost kicked myself later for doing so. Why did I keep quiet? I asked myself over and over again. Later, when I shared it with my husband, he shrugged it off as something I shouldn’t take seriously. But, it set me thinking about the numerous subtle ways in which women and girls in my society are daily rendered invisible, unimportant, and unworthy of equal dignity and respect as men and boys. A Christian brother (a medical doctor) reminded me publicly when I obtained a doctorate degree, “Remember that you are still a wife.” He went on to remark, “A woman can never rise beyond the level her husband sets for her.” And, she has to constantly apologize for appearing to be good, or even better than him, at whatever task.

I began to look more critically at this effacing mirror Nigerian society insists on holding up to the female that distorts the *imago Dei* proclaimed at creation and fashions her into Adam’s tip-toeing shadow. I meet such shadowy figures all the time, resigned to bear another’s seed and birth another’s dream. There’s nothing wrong with helping other people fulfill their destinies. But too often women and girls are forced into the mold of second-class citizen by the dictates of culture and religion, routinized in traditions, dogmas, and laws.

I love to point my Nigerian sisters to a brighter mirror; I speak to them about a different image. One of promise held up by the Lord Jesus Christ himself to Mary affirming her aspiration to hear the words of life and spirit when she dared to sit at his feet among men (Luke 10:38–41). It’s a mirror that portrays the true meaning of inner power, purpose, and a passion to live life to the fullest. He held it up to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and others when he accepted their financial support (Luke 8:1–3) and to the woman at the well when he engaged her in profound intellectual and spiritual discourse (John 4).

Jesus calls women to conform to his non-stereotyped image and, in so doing, frees women to explore our true identity and embark on an exciting discovery of new frontiers. I was a nineteen-year-old college student when I began in earnest to peer curiously into this brand new mirror, and I still discover new things that thrill my heart. I am encouraged daily to lift my head high because I realize that one of Satan’s oldest tactics is to try to make those God has endowed for greatness feel small, worthless, and inconsequential. So I salute African women who wave off the put-downs, thrust their shoulders to their daily tasks, and still manage to reach from the behind the shadows. I am gratified by the rise of a young generation of women, like my four vibrant daughters—IB, Itunu, Toni, and Teni—who are embracing a different

image that leaves no room for thinking, “I’m just a woman.” Itunu’s poem puts it so well:

POEM

Our face is a mask of our true reflection
Look behind the canvas we’re all the same complexion
The mirror is a deception
A mere disguise made to hide where our true beauty lies
Our hearts
[...]
Well I’m here to tell you different
You’re different
To believe in your dreams
And you’ll achieve a new reality
Moral of the story is no matter what you’re beautiful
Dark skinned
Light skinned
White skinned
It’s not that deep
It’s just a shade
These things will fade
Now that’s a thought for you to keep
If there’s one thing that you could take from all I’ve said be you
Because the only one that’s best at that is...
YOU
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