

In His image He made... Her

(If we do not hear her story, we miss half the story.)

(Start the sermon by asking one or two women to read out the below facts.  
Have them on screen if possible)

## FACTS

- In 18 countries, husbands can legally prevent their wives from working; in 39 countries, daughters and sons do not have equal inheritance rights;
- Globally, one in five women and girls, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner with the last 12 months, but 49 countries lack laws protecting women from domestic violence.
- Globally, 16 million girls aged 15-19 years give birth each year – 90% of these girls are married.
- Complications during pregnancy and birth is the leading cause of death for 15-19 year old girls.
- In 2016, HIV infections were 44% higher among adolescent girls than adolescent boys.
- 60% of under nourished people worldwide are women and girls.

## Introduction

(Begin with an introduction that contextualises you're the sermon, for example)

*(Friday was International Women's Day – a day that occurs annually to both celebrate women's achievements and remind us that many women and girls around the world still suffer from high levels of discrimination and violence.*

As we saw in the self-denial video,) around the world today girls and women face certain challenges for no other reason than they are female and not male. The societies they live in value their lives less, and place limitations on them which exclude them from economic, social and religious opportunities. Countless women around the world never know what it is to be free. The Salvation Army is breaking cultural boundaries in places like India, by

empowering young women like Manisha to run their own businesses. Giving them access to healthcare and education. When we give to self-denial we are giving to programs that make a very practical, real difference to the lives of girls and women around the world.

Through these practical actions the Salvation Army is showing generations of women and girls that they are children of God, made in his image and of equal value in his eyes. We do this because as a movement we recognise the biblical truth of equality between genders, that God made both men and women in his image.

**Genesis 1: 26-27 tells us:**

*Then God said, “Let us make humankind<sup>[c]</sup> in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,<sup>[d]</sup> and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”*

*So God created humankind<sup>[e]</sup> in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;<sup>[f]</sup>  
male and female he created them.*

When God created humankind, humans were created equal, both reflecting his image. While things started well, Genesis 3 tells us the story of what we usually refer to as The Fall – the acts of disobedience committed by humans that led to a break in our relationship with God, and the consequences which followed. It is here that relationships between God and humans, between men and women, and between humans and the earth was changed for the worse. Speaking to Eve, in Genesis 3:16 God said, *your husband shall rule over you.*

We see this playing out in our broken world. Each year in Australia alone, 50 women are murdered by their former or current partners. Women are treated in many cultures as objects to own, use, discard, or enslave as desired. That is the way of the world.

But this is clearly not the way God intended relationships between men and women to be. In his image he created them, male and female he created them. Women were also made in God’s image with the value, rights and responsibilities that came with the position of being equal partners in

stewarding the creation. That was God's intended design, his desire for relationships between humans in his kingdom. When Jesus began his ministry he came teaching and living the Kingdom of God on earth, showing us in his words and actions how God intends us to live.

### Jesus and Gender equality

Jesus lived in a time where women were not equal to men. Did you know that one of the daily prayers of Jewish men from that time included this prayer of thanks giving? "Praised be to Yahweh that he has not created me a woman." Jewish men were not supposed to speak to women in public and some would even cross the road to avoid an unknown woman. It was definitely inappropriate for a Rabbi to eat with women, allow them to touch him, and have women in his entourage. Jesus did all of these things and more. Thinking about Jesus in his first century backdrop shows how radical and inclusive Jesus was in his encounters with women.

There are several stories in the gospels that show how radical Jesus was in his treatment of women, and I'm going to speak to just a few from Luke today.

In our reading we heard about the bleeding woman who basically steals a miracle from Jesus. This nameless woman had a trifecta of situations that made her unclean in her culture. She was female, she had a gynaecological condition, and she was poor. She would have been excluded from the life of community, not allowed to go to the synagogue or join in community events or eat with others. I think of how frightened, how desperate and driven she must have been to be healed that she dared that day to grasp the hem of Jesus' robe.

And how did Jesus treat her when he found out what she had done? Did he scold her for touching him or send her away or demand she be punished? No. he called her daughter – he told her in front of all those people that she is a child of God, his family. He elevated her status as a woman and person and welcomed her into his circle.

There is something precious and welcoming about the way Jesus cared for women. In Luke 7, Jesus sees a widow mourning the death of her son and was moved with compassion for her. Jesus speaks to her in front of the crowd and

calls her son back to life. Luke 8:1-3 says that Jesus was followed in his travels by women; Mary, called Magdalene, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. These are influential women who travelled with and learned from Jesus. In Luke 10:38-42, Mary sits at Jesus feet, as a disciple to be taught, and when her sister Martha tells Jesus she should be in the kitchen helping, Jesus says no, she has the right to be with me. Luke 13, Jesus heals a crippled woman in the temple on the Sabbath by laying his hands on her, and then he calls her 'daughter of Abraham', a term of dignity usually reserved for men.

Jesus restricted nothing to women. He empowered women to take the place he called them to in his ministry. Jesus stood up for women, healed them and listened to their stories. He taught them, disciplined them and gave them a voice in his church. But in the Christian church, these stories are often glossed over or never heard.

### **The church and gender equality**

As a church, we are God's kingdom and should be the best reflection of how God intends us to live. We should be showing the world that God created men and women equally in his image, and that Jesus welcomed women into teaching, preaching and discipling roles in his church. Unfortunately, in the church we sometimes get this wrong.

(Please replace the below story with your own journey – how the church's failings on gender equality have affected you)

*The first time I ever saw a woman preach, was in the Salvation Army at Box Hill. That was 12 years ago, I was 23 years old. I still remember the feeling of awe, pride and acceptance I had when I saw Sonya up on the platform. To see a woman so respected, so wise and trusted that she was allowed to preach the Gospel, touched something deep inside of me. And she was a really good preacher, too. For the first time I was hearing a woman's voice, a woman's perspective on the gospel. I didn't realise at the time, but that day was a life changing moment for me.*

*Maybe those of you who were raised in the Salvation Army take this for granted, but for me, to see women teaching and in positions of leadership in a church was revolutionary.*

*I spent my teens to early twenties in a traditional, liturgical church which does not ordain women and has traditional ideas about the role of women in the church and home. These stereotypes and restrictions for women never sat quite right for me. This is partly because I've never fit the gender stereotypes.*

*I found it hard to find my place in that church. I felt Jesus calling me to something... but I could not imagine what that something could be because I had never seen it before.*

The Salvation Army isn't perfect on gender equality, that's true. But from our very beginning we have been a movement that recognised the equal calling of women to preach and minister. Both William and Catherine Booth recognised the value and inherent biblical truth of allowing women to preach and lead.

William Booth once wrote:

'I insist on the equality of women with men. Every officer and soldier should insist upon the truth that woman is as important, as valuable, as capable and as necessary to the progress and happiness of the world as man. Unfortunately a large number of people of every tribe, every class and nationality think otherwise. They still believe woman is inferior to man.'

When the Rev. A. A. Rees, published a pamphlet arguing that Paul specifically forbids all women from speaking in church, and that because of Eve's sin women were "under a denser cloud of suffering and humiliation" and must remain in subjection to men, Catherine Booth was enraged. She published her own pamphlet, "Female Teaching," arguing that God made man and woman together, and the subordination and subjection of women is "neither natural nor eternal." Catherine became well known for her preaching and for a time was the bread winner for their family.

Can you imagine a Salvation Army without its women in leadership?

Before coming to the Salvation Army I had never heard the stories of women in scripture told from the perspective of an actual woman... and this meant that I

never got to hear the full story of the gospel. Women *and men* in the church need to hear the stories of women in scripture, to see women in leadership and to hear the gospel preached by women.

God is not a man. God is not a woman. God is bigger than the gender stereotypes and restrictions we apply to both men and women. But God is beautifully reflected in both men and women who were both made in his image.

When we encourage women to tell the stories of their faith, their encounters with God, we all benefit... because God made women in his image too. But if we never hear from women we miss half of the story, we miss half of what God has to tell us about who he is.

We follow Jesus's example in the church and recognise women's worth, their spiritual gifts, their skills and creativity. That means that we listen to and celebrate the voices of women, we include girls and women and work towards a world where all women are safe and know their own value as human being created in his image.

In our church we let girls know that they are created in his image by being are careful about how we talk about God, by not falling into restrictive and unhelpful gender stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Gender equality is a value of the kingdom of God. From the first chapter of scripture to every encounter of Jesus with women. It is right that we fight for the rights of women and girls around the world. Don't get caught thinking that this issue is just for man-hating feminists.

Actress Emma Watson is one of the most respected feminist voices today. In her speech to the UN, she said; 'For the record, feminism by definition is: The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes.' I would like to add, religious equality. Watson has also tweeted that 'gender equality not only liberates women but also men from prescribed gender stereotypes.'

Jesus knew that women were of equal value to the Kingdom of God and he came to restore the Kingdom to us by restoring our relationships with God and each other, so that women could take their rightful place as equals in creation.

The Salvation Army will continue to stand up for the equality of women, and as a movement we all can do our part in fighting for what is just and biblical. We may not have the same cultural barriers to gender equality as our brothers and sisters in other places do, but there is work that we can do here too. For the first time the Salvation Army in Australia has appointed a woman officer to research gender equality. We also now have a target of a minimum 30% women on all executive boards. This is pretty great news.

### Response

Some questions we can reflect on this week as we ask God to show us where we can do better on gender equality include:

Do our attitudes and behaviours in our church align with God's value of women? Do we have bias that we need the Holy Spirit to deal with? Are there any spaces in our church where women or girls are missing from the table?

How can we empower girls and women in our church and in our other circles of influence?

How can we encourage each other as men and women, both made in the image of God, to live the kingdom values and demonstrate God's kingdom on earth right now.

### PRAYER

Lord, today we honour the women of faith and courage all around us.

Woman of courage, compassionate, patient.

Our number is legion, our gifts diverse,

our goal one and the same:

that history will one day recall our names.

We honor the women of the Hebrew scriptures,

Whose faithfulness and persistence through the generations passed on the stories of your saving grace to their children and children's children

Who tended their gardens, walked their streets and built their community,

Who patiently waited for you to be revealed in the Christ

We honor the women of Jesus' time

Who cared for the community of believers;

Who followed Jesus to Calvary;

Who buried Him;

Who proclaimed Jesus' resurrection

Who passed the Gospel to their families, friends and strangers;

We honor the valiant women of our own time

Who nudge us back on track;

Who remind us of the promises of Christ'

Who claim the Gospel for women, too;

Who preach the reality of wholeness;

Who strain against a patriarchal church

Who challenge us to grow!

Living God, Today we gather in Your Presence.

Valiant women throughout the world,

and all gathered here, raise our voices in global petition

for your promise of wholeness --fullness of life--

to be realized in all our world, in our nations and in our lives.

This we pray in Your Name. AMEN.