

Second Sunday After The Epiphany - Elizabeth de la Garza-Ahern

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Last September, after a long day at a conference in Dallas, TX, 3 of my friends and I took a shuttle to the Grapevine Art Walk. It was a very pleasant evening and the site of the art walk was a quaint street with its boutiques, galleries and restaurants. On the street, numerous vendors showcased their woodwork, jewelry, food, etc. The smell of food was everywhere, from funnel cake to cream-cheese-stuffed, bacon-wrapped jalapeno peppers, and a live hard rock band played in the background.

Soon we all came to a vendor that was selling skins. Mary, my Chinese friend, and Sandra, my Puerto Rican friend, were both amused. Seriously. Having grown up with cattle, I was turned off to see cow skin dyed into psychedelic greens and oranges from the 60's, with a shimmery tone. But Mary started asking for prices, then said, "Let's do this the Chinese way," and started bartering. The attendant became uneasy and a little defensive, which caught my attention. I noticed his poor customer service and business manner and his unkempt appearance. He was white and of small frame. I asked him, "Where are you from?" He said, "Western Pennsylvania." To which I replied, "Amish country?" He said, "Yes," then told me a story about how he had grown up Amish but was disowned and kicked out as a young teen because of some indiscretions he committed with a girl named Gretchen; he had never gone back or spoken with his family since. I frankly was surprised that this man (now probably in his thirties) would tell about something so personal, but there it was. Something about the way he behaved and his choice of words—some in German that sounded vulgar—made me not trust him and even look down on him. I just had to move on; realizing the time, my friends and I separated.

I was not looking for anything in particular, but if the right thing came, I would get it. After a while, I found myself at the tent of an artist. Most of her work seemed a little loud for my taste, as she painted a lot of pop-culture icons in a swirly van Gogh style with super-vibrant colors. My daughter Aly is a wrangler and the theme for her room decor is horses. I noted some paintings of horses, originals that I could not afford, and then I started looking at prints. As the artist pointed some things out, I noticed her very heavy accent. I asked her where she was from—she said, "Russia." I was surprised; she did not have the yellowish-pale skin tone that I am accustomed to see in Russians, but a brown tone. Her hair was black and stood about three inches high and her eyes were definitely very dark. Her manners were very graceful, her choice of words fitting, and her tone of voice suitable. When I found the print I wanted (horse and Texas meadow full of blue bonnets—the Texas state flower), her eyes lit up and she became even more alive and pleasant as she told me, with excitement, that the original was in an executive office building in Dallas.

As I was paying and checking out, the Amish guy appeared at her tent. I could not help but ask her, "Do you know this guy?" She said, "Yes," and told him to wait for her. I was surprised at the stark contrast between the two personalities.

Soon after that my friends and I reconnected. As we walked together back to the shuttle showcasing our purchases of skins and my art print, I gazed back, and there—in the middle of the path—stood both of them, looking at us as we walked away. All of a sudden, I found the Amish guy more likeable, because he was with her. This picture of them looking at us with such curiosity is still very clear in my mind, and I wish I could know more about their personal stories. To her I would ask, “When did you discover your God-given talent as a painter? Tell me more about your heritage and where you came from?” To him I would ask, “Have you considered contacting your parents/family and reconciling? How would your life been different if you have stayed in Pennsylvania?”...and many more questions...

I realize that it would be impossible for me to know the personal story of every random and interesting person that I meet, but God knows each and every one, every single story of every person in this planet! God created us, God knows us and God calls us.

The text today in the Gospel of John tells us about an encounter between Jesus and Nathanael. This is the time right after Jesus starts his ministry and has been baptized by John the Baptist. He has called the two brothers Andrew and Simon (whose name Jesus changes to Peter) and also Philip—all of them from Bethsaida (north of Jerusalem)—to follow him. Now Philip said to Nathanael, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel was skeptical and said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I guess Nathaniel had his reasons to be prejudiced. Wouldn't you, if someone told you something great came out of Vandalia, Carlyle or Hillsboro, Illinois?

Prejudice is any preconceived opinion or feeling, either favorable or unfavorable (Webster's Dictionary). It is inevitable because of the lenses that each of us wear (or the way we see things) based on our upbringing and our experiences. The level of prejudice varies in its severity and the results demonstrated in attitudes and behaviors towards people in various situations. In this country, we automatically attribute 10 extra IQ points based just on someone's accent or where they come from. However, we also easily suspect others of criminality because of how they look. Tomorrow we commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. He once said, “I have a dream, that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” He dreamed of a time when blacks in this country would be freed from oppression and despair caused by prejudice.

This is precisely where Hannah was before the Lord answered her prayers. She was oppressed by her own husband's other wife, who taunted her and humiliated her, and she was in despair because of the disrespect and indignity she suffered as a barren women in her time and culture. As Hannah cried out to the Lord, the Lord answered her prayer and she had Samuel. She kept her promise and dedicated the boy Samuel to service for the Lord, leaving him in the temple with Eli at an early age.

I have always been fascinated by the fact that Samuel heard God's voice, and at an early age. People came to know that God was with him, and he plays a significant role in the

church (and narrative about God's people). Samuel is the one that selects Saul as Israel's first king, then later, David. Samuel was called and used by the Lord for a particular time in history. The way God calls each individual varies.

Last January I went to India stepping out in faith, not knowing much about what I would experience. We departed for India on a Wednesday and arrived there on a Friday in the very early hours. We were received warmly by our hosts, with jasmine and rose garlands that were placed around our necks. Then we waited for the rest of the group joining us from Seattle: six from Seattle Pacific University and another, who orchestrated the trip.

That same day, after a short nap, we joined a group of one hundred pastors for a pastors' conference. All were men—the only women in the mix were the three masters' level students from SPU and I. It was a joyful worship experience with music, singing and dance. For the three days following, our team from Greenville, SPU and Indiana presented wonderful messages related to the power of God (through the cross, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, etc). On the last day, Sunday, Robleh, a Ph.D. student from SPU, gave a lesson. Robleh introduced himself and explained that his was an East African name given to those born during a storm or rainy season; he said that it was fitting because of the storm he was born into, and that later he would tell us about it. Robleh gave a wonderful lesson on the power of God through community. He concluded by saying, "And I would not be here if it were not for God's community." He almost sat down, but then said, "Oh, the storm I was born into is that when I was nine years old, my father killed my mother and then killed himself." A really heavy feeling descended upon the place. I felt a heavy burden, and I sensed that others were feeling the heavy burden for Robleh, too.

The program was moving on, but I felt like a huge rush of energy came onto my heart and brain, reminding me of what "Roble" means in Spanish. It is a tree, like a big oak tree. Immediately, I saw a big, green and strong tree and a Scripture passage. It was Psalm 1, and a revelation, "This is Robleh and who he is in Christ." I thought, "This is great, after the service I will tell him." But then I felt an urging that I needed to share right then and there with everyone. Like I said, the program continued, and next we were called to the front to help distribution of brand new shirts that each pastor was to receive. While I was up front, before we started the shirt distribution, I kept feeling the same nagging feeling that I was to share with everyone. It was a powerful feeling. I thought, "But I would have to interrupt the program, and what if the bishop who is presiding does not want me to share?" As that bishop was speaking he came really close to me and then he paused.

That's when I approached him and asked if I could share something. He said, "Yes," gave a brief introduction like "Sister Elizabeth wants to share something," and gave me the microphone. I reached for a nearby Bible, and proceeded: "You have heard about the meaning of Robleh's name; Spanish is my first language and in Spanish 'Roble' means 'big, mighty tree.' And this is what I see in you, Robleh. I see Psalm 1: 'Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he

meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” I saw Robleh’s eyes watering and felt mine moist too, but the program continued. We distributed shirts and went on with the next item on the list. We had chai break, then another service which concluded with a message on the power of the resurrection. Then, we had lunch, we hung out with the kids at the orphanage, we met with leaders, etc. etc.

To be honest, if it were not for the affirmation that I received, I might have wondered about the validity of my speaking. But afterwards one pastor colleague told me how glad he was that I had spoken a blessing on Robleh. He said that he sensed that all of the pastors felt helpless, not knowing what to do with Robleh’s story. I understood—pastors are inclined to respond when they hear a need! He later wrote me a note saying that he will never forget this. I overheard another leader telling Robleh that changing a name was a tradition signifying a new start. Robleh himself told me, “This means a lot to me.” Our translator said, “I am so glad that you cared enough to share, because this spoke to me about how much God cares for each one of us, regardless of our past situation. I am an orphan too and God has done great things for me.”

God knows Robleh’s story, and my story, and he gives us what to say so it is the most fitting, the most reaffirming, the most pleasing, the most edifying, what is the most needed and the most beautiful.

I know that God cares about the Amish guy and the Russian artist that I met at the Art Walk because I think about them and I pray for them. This praying is prompted by the Holy Spirit—this is my calling in this situation. God knows everyone’s story! God created us, God knows us and God calls us into various situations to provide and edify. May we be ready to listen and follow through.