

Seventh Sunday Of Easter – Elizabeth Ahern

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

I recently had a medical appointment and while seated in the waiting room, the O magazine caught my attention. O, The Oprah Magazine is a place where many get the latest information and inspiration—including expert advice, style ideas, health tips and delicious recipes. Listed as a main topic was the question “What defines you?” I was intrigued. But before I could go to the section and read O’s expert advice, I was called in to see the health care provider and left the magazine behind.

In the Gospel reading today (which is also called the high priestly prayer) Jesus gives a farewell before his death and says: *I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

With the intention of integrating faith and learning into the classroom environment, this is one of the Scripture references that I used in the strategic management course I taught at Greenville University. I would show a film that presented two individuals trying to reinvent themselves in the tech world as they manage to get an internship at Google. At the end of the discussion about the relationship of the marketplace and us (Christ-likes), I would ask the students to respond about what this scripture meant to them in light of the discussion.

To be honest with you, the word *belong* tripped me a little, because it means to have a proper place, to be related to, to be a member or to be owned and to fit in socially. Who does not want to belong where they are, in the marketplace? Who wants to be a misfit? Taken literally, we may end up creating our own isolated world, so well barricaded to the point that we can no longer be salt and light in it. Thus, it cannot be an ‘us vs. them’.

Taking a look at The Message, which is a paraphrased translation from the Greek: *They are no more **defined** by the world than I am **defined** by the world.*

What defines you? What defines you is supposed to be the **guiding force** that helps to guide you in making decisions, in what you say and in what you do with your daily affairs and in life as a whole. In essence, what defines you is descriptive of what you believe and who you are. Who you are is tied to your identity—the distinguishing characteristics of a person and their personality.

John 17:17 *Sanctify them (set them aside as sacred) in the truth; your word is truth. In The Message: Make them holy – consecrated – with the truth; your word is consecrating truth. In other words, God’s word sets us aside for the truth.*

17:18 *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. In The Message: In the same way that you gave me a **mission** in the world, I give them a **mission** in the world.*

17:19 *And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. In The Message: I am consecrating myself for their sakes. So they’ll be truth-consecrated in their*

mission. In other words, so that they will be consecrated (set aside or set apart) for the truth in their mission.

You may have heard that I went to a foreign country in 2014. The main reason I went was to teach international business, but while I was there I was exposed to some of the ministries taking place there.

I went stepping out in faith, not knowing much about what I would experience. A professor and a pastor from this community and I departed on a Wednesday, and we arrived there on a Friday in the very early hours. We were received well by our hosts and they outfitted us with the proper jasmine and rose garlands by placing them around our necks. Then we waited for the rest of the group arriving from Seattle—seven more.

That same day, after a short nap, we joined a group of 100 pastors for a pastors' conference, all men. The only women present were three masters' level students from there, and I. At first I felt a little insignificant and definitely gender-outnumbered. Regardless, it was a joyful worship experience with music, singing and dance. For three days our team from Greenville and from Seattle 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 at the time from Seattle) gave a lesson.

Robleh introduced himself, and gave the meaning of his name as 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 he said, "Oh, the storm I was born into is that when I was nine years old, my father killed my mother and then he killed himself."

There was a really heavy feeling that descended upon the place. I felt a heavy burden and I sensed that everyone was feeling the heavy burden for Robleh too.

The program was moving on, but I felt like a huge rush of energy came into my heart and brain, reminding me of what "Roble" means in Spanish. It is a tree, a big oak tree. Immediately, I saw a big, green, strong tree and a Scripture passage. It was Psalm 1, and a revelation that 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 with the distribution of brand new shirts that each pastor was to receive. While I was up front, and before we started the shirt distribution, I kept feeling the same nagging feeling that I was to share with everyone. And it was a powerful feeling. I thought, "But I would have to interrupt the program, and what if the bishop presiding does not want me to share?" As the bishop was saying something he came really close to me and then he paused.

That's when I approached him and asked him if I could share something. He said, "Yes," gave a brief introduction ("Sister Elizabeth wants to share something"), and gave me the microphone. I reached for a Bible, which was on a chair in the front, because I only had the New Testament.

I proceeded: "You have heard about the meaning of Robleh's name, but Spanish is my first language and in Spanish "Roble" means "oak"—which is a 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, chai tea break, then another service concluding with a message on the power of the Resurrection. We had lunch and we fellowshiped, we hung out with the kids at the orphanage, we had meetings with leaders, and on and on.

To be honest, if it were not for the affirmation that I received, I may have wondered about the validity of my speaking. But afterwards our local pastor told me that he was so glad 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. He also wrote me a note saying that he would never forget this. I overheard our local professor telling Robleh that changing a name was a tradition signifying a new start. Robleh himself told me, "This means a lot to me," and later on, as I asked permission to use his story, said that he thinks about it often. 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 can mold and change what defines you and your identity, and he uses you also to fulfill his mission. Because you seek truth and make it a priority, "God likes you! You are now *a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit ... always in blossom*" (paraphrased from The Message).

The chorus from the song, "The Mission," by Steve Green says:

To love the Lord our God is the heartbeat of our mission,
The spring from which our service overflows.
Across the street or around the world, the mission's still the same:
Proclaim and live the Truth in Jesus' name.

On this Mother's Day, we remember that long ago, faithful women proclaimed the good news of Jesus' resurrection, and the world was changed forever. Let us keep faith with them, that our witness may be as bold, our love as deep, and our faith as true. Amen.