

A Reflection on the Readings for Last Epiphany/Transfiguration, Matthew 17:1-9

By The Rev. Teri C. Pilarski

The auditorium at the Salvation Army on 14th Street in New York City was filled to capacity.

Women from around the world, young and old, from many countries, colors, religions, ethnicities and cultures, gathered for the 55th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) NGO orientation. A variety of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and their representatives were present. Some NGO's made presentations at the orientation and most NGO's offered flyers advertising the workshops they were sponsoring for the two week UNCSW.

The keynote speaker for the orientation was Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, and current Under-Secretary General at the United Nations and the Executive Director of the newly formed UN Women. You can read about her and her speeches <a href=<http://www.unwomen.org/about-us/executive-director/>> here. Ms. Bachelet is an inspiring woman with great intelligence and keen insight. She holds a privileged position at the UN, one which will enable her to advocate for issues that concern women and girls, keeping them at the forefront of all UN discussions.

Later that afternoon, in a break-out session on the topic of women, girls, and education, I found myself in discussion with two women from Morocco. Dressed in headscarves the two women shared stories about the trials little girls face in an effort to acquire an education in rural Morocco. These include the risk of being attacked on the way to school by wild dogs, and or raped and kidnapped by groups of men, or being forced into household labor for wealthy urban families. Their greatest concern was the illegality of the headscarf in the classroom. Wearing the religious headscarf is illegal in some school systems. Therefore girls who wish to practice their faith and wear the scarf are prevented from acquiring and education. These women from Morocco wanted to understand the UN system of advocacy, how to make their concerns known and how to get some action for the well-being of the girl-child in Morocco.

A day earlier I attended the Ecumenical Women's Orientation at the United Nations Church Center. At this orientation I heard a panel of speakers discuss the role of advocacy at the UNCSW. One woman named Marta said this: Go to a caucus, learn who your UN Representative is. Watch for that person to leave, perhaps go to the bathroom. Follow the person and when you catch up to them be prepared to 1. Share a short story that conveys your concern and 2. Give the representative one or two key points you want them to take back with them to UN discussions.

I shared this with the women from Morocco and gave them two flyers I had on caucuses for the education of girls. I encouraged them to go and find their representative and share their story and concerns. I told the women that I will hold them in my prayers and every time I think of Morocco I will think of them. Their story is now part of me.

When I shared this story with my Bishop one of his observations was that, I, a privileged white woman from the United States, had access to knowledge that these women from Morocco did not. He makes a valid point.

However, what I really think is that these women are smart, savvy, survivors, and they would have found the answer sooner or later. I just happened to be there. And honestly, I don't know if the information I gave them is what they really needed or used. What I do know is that they probably figured it out. And, because of their efforts, there will be some movement toward the improvement in the quality of life for little girls in rural Morocco.

I spent a week in New York City attending the UNCSW and the parallel NGO events. Because I am currently under-employed and have had to piece together an income for the last 20 months I had no resources to pay for my trip to this event. Thankfully, and gratefully, I was sponsored by Anglican Women's Empowerment (AWE). In the course of my life, rising up from a working class family, acquiring two Master's degrees (and the student loan debt), and working in fields that are male-dominated, I have faced many challenges and struggles as a girl and as a woman. And even still I remain a privileged white woman. Nonetheless this privileged status is not without significant life lessons. Frankly, not all white privilege is the same. Being white can mask the ways in which I have been subjected to misogynistic prejudice, stereotypes, classism, and systems of dysfunction.

A few days ago a friend of mine was ordained. I have known her since 1995 when we were both in seminary together. For a variety of reasons her ordination process was stopped and she was subjected to some painful scrutiny. She graduated from seminary and proceeded on to a career as a hospital chaplain. Then, a few years ago, the call to ordination began to percolate in her again, culminating in her ordination some fifteen years after the process was stopped. Her ordination reminds me that the Holy Spirit is tenacious and always gets her way. Sooner or later, regardless of how humans try to divert her, the Holy Spirit ends up moving us. Her job, like the mountain top experience of the disciples who witness Jesus' transfiguration, is to lead us into and through transformative experiences of grace. Her job is to enliven the work of God in and through us. The Holy Spirit walks us through the challenges life throws our way and sustains us with the love of Christ. The Holy Spirit is alive in us, transforming our challenges into compassion and love for ourselves and for others. The Holy Spirit enables us to turn life's challenges into privileges of insight, self-awareness, and other-awareness. My theology professor believed in the power of the Holy Spirit to continue her work even into the after-life. By this he meant that human beings are unable to wake up to the privileges of the Spirit until we are broken open and transformed, and for some that means death comes first.

My life experiences have left me with a heightened sensitivity to the issues of women and children, increasing my capacity for compassion. I suspect that my experiences at the UNCSW, the stories I heard, the experience of being in the presence of 8500 women from around the world, and, the facts I learned, will become epiphanic, life changing experiences. I will be transformed, over and over again, as I reflect on this time. I have been made acutely aware, in new ways, that privilege has many facets. Sometimes privilege leads to abuse and oppression, and becomes life-depleting. I certainly learned a lot about that manifestation of privilege at the NGO workshops. But there are other expressions of privilege that can be life-giving.

I am privileged to have met these women and to have heard their stories. I am privileged to have worn my "collar" of ordination as a witness to the role of women clergy activists for social justice. As ordained women our role is not "better" than others. My role as an ordained woman is distinctive and particular, and comes with a privileged potential to open doors and hearts. Wearing my collar gets me into hospitals and ICU's and people's lives. Peter, filled with awe at the realization of who Jesus is, wanted to give Jesus a place of privilege. But Peter's understanding of privilege would have contained Jesus, contained God's love, to the mountain top. Jesus tells Peter, and us, the love of God is for everyone. We are all privileged in God's eyes. The love of God exists within the beauty of our diversity. We are not intended to contain our differences nor does God intend for us to all be the same. Whether through a clergy collar or a headscarf or a prayer shawl or any other expression of faith God's love expresses itself in the rich diversity of all humanity.